

2 Building tasks

2.1 Building things through language

Language has a magical property: when we speak or write, we design what we have to say to fit the situation in which we are communicating. But, at the same time, how we speak or write creates that very situation. It seems, then, that we fit our language to a situation that our language, in turn, helps to create in the first place.

This is rather like the “chicken and egg” question: which comes first – the situation we’re in, e.g., a committee meeting, or the language we use, e.g., our committee ways of talking and interacting? Is this a “committee meeting” *because* we are speaking and acting this way, or are we speaking and acting this way *because* this is a committee meeting? After all, if we did not speak and act in certain ways, committees could not exist; but, then, if institutions, committees, and committee meetings didn’t already exist, speaking and acting this way would be nonsense. The answer here is that this magical property is real and language and institutions “bootstrap” each other into existence in a reciprocal process through time.

Another way to look at the matter is this: we always actively use spoken and written language to create or build the world of activities (e.g., committee meetings), identities (e.g., committee chairs, members, facilitators and obstructionists), and institutions (committees) around us. However, thanks to the workings of history and culture, we often do this in more or less routine ways. These routines make activities, identities, and institutions, like committees, committee members (of various types) and committee meetings, seem to exist apart from language and action in the here-and-now. Nonetheless, these activities, identities, and institutions have to be continuously and actively rebuilt in the here-and-now. This is what accounts for change and transformation.

We continually and actively build and rebuild our worlds not just through language but through language used in tandem with actions, interactions, non-linguistic symbol systems, objects, tools, technologies, and distinctive ways of thinking, valuing, feeling, and believing. Sometimes what we build is quite similar to what we have built before; sometimes it is not. But language-in-action is always and everywhere an active building process.

So language-in-use is a tool, used alongside other tools, to design or build things. Whenever we speak or write, we always and simultaneously construct or build seven things or seven areas of “reality.” Let’s call these seven things the “seven building tasks” of language. In turn, since we use language to build these seven things, a discourse analyst can ask seven different questions about any piece of language-in-use. Below, I list the seven building tasks and the discourse analysis question to which each gives rise.

Significance

We use language to make things significant (to give them meaning or value) in certain ways, to build significance. As the saying goes, we make “mountains out of molehills.” For example, I enter a plain, square room. There is no clear “front” or “back” to the room. But I speak and act in a certain way (e.g., like someone about to run a meeting), and, low and behold, where I sit becomes the “front” of the room. I have used language in such a way as to make where I am sitting have the significance of being the “front of the room” for the time being.

Discourse analysis question: How is this piece of language being used to make certain things significant or not and in what ways?

Activities

We use language to get recognized as engaging in a certain sort of activity, that is, to build an activity here-and-now. For example, I talk and act in one way and I am engaged in formally opening a committee meeting; I talk and act in another way and I am engaged in “chit-chat” before the official start of the meeting. When I act I have to use language to make clear to others what it is I take myself to be doing.

Discourse analysis question: What activity or activities is this piece of language being used to enact (i.e., get others to recognize as going on)?

Identities

We use language to get recognized as taking on a certain identity or role, that is to build an identity here-and-now. For example, I talk and act in one way and I am speaking and acting as “chair” of the committee; at the next moment I speak and talk in a different way and I am speaking and acting as one peer/colleague speaking to another. Even if I have an official appointment as chair of the committee, I am not always taken as acting as the chair, even during meetings. I have to enact this identity at the right times and places to make it work.

Discourse analysis question: What identity or identities is this piece of language being used to enact (i.e., get others to recognize as operative)?

Relationships

We use language to signal what sort of relationship we have, want to have, or are trying to have with our listener(s), reader(s), or other people, groups, or institutions about whom we are communicating; that is, we use language to build social relationships. For example, in a committee meeting, as chair of the committee, I say “Prof. Smith I’m very sorry to have to move us on to the next agenda item” and signal a relatively formal and deferential relationship with Professor Smith. On the other hand, suppose I say, “Ed, it’s time to move on.” Now I signal a relatively informal and less deferential relationship with the same person.

Discourse analysis question: What sort of relationship or relationships is this piece of language seeking to enact with others (present or not)?

Politics (the distribution of social goods)

We use language to convey a perspective on the nature of the distribution of social goods, that is, to build a perspective on social goods. For example, if I say “Microsoft loaded its operating system with bugs,” I treat Microsoft as purposeful and responsible, perhaps even culpable. If I say, on the other hand, “Microsoft’s operating system is loaded with bugs,” I treat Microsoft as less purposeful and responsible, less culpable. How I phrase the matter has implications for social goods such as guilt and blame, legal responsibility or lack of it, or Microsoft’s bad or good motives.

Discourse analysis question: What perspective on social goods is this piece of language communicating (i.e., what is being communicated as to what is taken to be “normal,” “right,” “good,” “correct,” “proper,” “appropriate,” “valuable,” “the ways things are,” “the way things ought to be,” “high status or low status,” “like me or not like me,” and so forth)?

Connections

We use language to render certain things connected or relevant (or not) to other things, that is, to build connections or relevance. For example, I talk and act so as to make what I am saying here-and-now in this committee meeting about whether we should support affirmative action in hiring connected or relevant to (or, on the

other hand, not connected or relevant to) what I said last week about my support for the new government's turn to the right. Things are not always inherently connected or relevant to each other. I have to make such connections. Even when things seem inherently connected or relevant to each other, I can use language to break or mitigate such connections.

Discourse analysis question: How does this piece of language connect or disconnect things; how does it make one thing relevant or irrelevant to another?

Sign systems and knowledge

There are many different languages (e.g., Spanish, Russian, English). There are many different varieties of any one language (e.g., the language of lawyers, the language of biologists, the language of hip-hop artists). There are communicative systems that are not language (e.g., equations, graphs, images). These are all different sign systems. Furthermore, we humans are always making knowledge and belief claims within these systems. We can use language to make certain sign systems and certain forms of knowledge and belief relevant or privileged, or not, in given situations, that is to build privilege or prestige for one sign system or knowledge claim over another. For example, I talk and act so as to make the knowledge and language of lawyers relevant (privileged) or not over “everyday language” or over “non-lawyerly academic language” in our committee discussion of facilitating the admission of more minority students.

Discourse analysis question: How does this piece of language privilege or disprivilege specific sign systems (e.g., Spanish vs. English, technical language vs. everyday language, words vs. images, words vs. equations) or different ways of knowing and believing or claims to knowledge and belief?

2.2 An example

We will turn now to an example of discourse analysis used to uncover the seven building tasks at work in a piece of data. However, it is important at the outset to keep several things in mind. First, since we will be dealing with only a small piece of data, taken from a much larger corpus, we will be formulating *hypotheses* about this data. These hypotheses would need to be confirmed further by looking at more data and, perhaps, engaging in the collection of additional data. Much of discourse analysis – much of science, in general – is about formulating and gaining some confidence in hypotheses which must be further investigated, rather than gaining any sort of “definitive proof,” which really does not exist in empirical inquiries. We must always be

open, no matter how confident we are in our hypotheses, to finding evidence that might go against our favored views.

Second, discourse analysis is always a movement from context to language and from language to context. We gain information about a context in which a piece of language has been used and use this information to form hypotheses about what that piece of language means and is doing. In turn, we closely study the piece of language and ask ourselves what we can learn about the context in which the language was used and how that context was construed (interpreted) by the speaker/writer and listener(s)/reader(s). In this brief example, we can engage in this two-way process in only a limited way.

The data comes from a project in which a university history professor (I will refer to her as “Sarah Miller,” not her real name) wanted to work with middle-school teachers, to engage their students in oral history. She wanted the children to interview their relatives and neighbors to gain information about the history of their local neighborhoods and the city in which they lived. These oral histories were intended eventually to inform an exhibit in the city’s historical museum.

The university at which the professor taught – which I will call “Woodson” – was a small elite private university that was over a hundred years old. The city in which the university resided – which I will call “New Derby” – was largely a working-class industrial city. The teachers that the professor dealt with were public school teachers with working-class origins. There were historic “town–gown” tensions between the university and the city and, in particular, tensions between people who taught at the university and people who taught in the public schools, tensions over status and commitment to the city. The members of the university faculty had not been born in the city and often did not stay there, moving on to other jobs in other cities; the public school teachers had invariably been born there and intended to stay there.

The data printed below comes from the first meeting of the group that was going to work on the oral history project in two schools. The meeting, held at one of the two schools to be involved in the project, was attended by four teachers from the two schools, the university professor and two of her research assistants, and a representative of a group that was helping to fund the joint work of the professor and the teachers, as well as a couple of other people. The speaker is one of the teachers (I will call her “Karen Jones”). She has been asked by the person chairing the meeting (the representative of the funding agency) to give those at the meeting some background on what had transpired prior to this first official meeting.

The history professor had called the curriculum coordinator at Karen’s school – a woman we will refer to as “Susan Washington” – to ask for help on her project and to gain access to the school. The “Summer Institute” Karen refers to was a workshop on research collaborations between university educators and local school teachers sponsored by the Education program at the university. The funders of the oral history project, who were also helping to support the Summer Institute, had hoped that Professor Miller and the teachers she was going to work with would attend the Institute.

So, at last, here's the data. To make matters clearer, I leave out many details from the transcript, things like pausing and hesitation, details which are, of course, themselves also meaningful and would be included in any fuller analysis. I capitalize words that were said with particular emphasis:

- 1 Last year, Susan Washington, who is our curriculum coordinator here had a call from Sarah at Woodson
- 2 And called me and said:
- 3 "We have a person from Woodson who's in the History Department
- 4 And she's interested in doing some research into black history in New Derby
- 5 And she would like to get involved with the school
- 6 And here's her number
- 7 Give her a call"
- 8 And I DID call her
- 9 And we BOTH expected to be around for the Summer Institute at Woodson
- 10 I did participate in it
- 11 But SARAH wasn't able to do THAT

While not all building tasks will be as readily apparent in all pieces of data, we can always ask questions about each one to see what we get. One device that helps us think about what something means is to ask in what other ways it could have been said or written. Once we see what alternatives existed, we can ask why the person said or wrote it as they did and not in some alternative way. So let's look at each of the building tasks in turn.

Significance

How does Karen make the fact that Sarah wasn't at the Summer Institute significant? This event could have been treated as unimportant, of little significance. However, Karen treats it as a significant happening. Karen uses her words to create a clear contrast between herself and Sarah, and Sarah's failure to attend the Summer Institute takes on significance in terms of this contrast. Karen portrays herself as responsible and as someone who did what she was told to do. She stresses this by saying "I DID call her," instead of just "I called her." She says that both (stressing "both") she and Sarah "expected" (intended) to be "around for the Summer Institute," implying, perhaps, that Sarah may have "been around," but, nonetheless, not bothered to come. She then stresses that she herself did participate (note, again, "I DID participate in it" instead of "I participated" or just "I went"). Karen concludes "But SARAH wasn't able to do THAT." Here she uses "but" to create a contrast between her own behavior and Sarah's. She stresses both "Sarah" and "that," thereby emphasizing the contrast between herself and Sarah yet more. And she focuses on Sarah's "ability" ("wasn't able to do"), rather than just saying "But Sarah didn't come" or "Sarah

couldn't come." All these details make us see that Sarah's absence from the Institute is treated by Karen as a significant or meaningful fact. She does not say exactly what she finds significant about this fact, but leaves this to be inferred by her listeners.

Activities

What is Karen using language to do here? What social activity is she attempting to enact? It appears that Karen is trying to contrast her responsible behavior and commitment to a project that she didn't ask to be on (note that she says Sarah contacted the school and, in turn, the curriculum coordinator told Karen to call Sarah) with Sarah's less responsible behavior and lesser commitment to a project she herself had requested and set in motion. Karen's social activity here is one of positioning herself in certain ways in front of the group and for the project to come and positioning Sarah in other ways. Note the pattern: "I DID . . .," "we BOTH expected . . .," "I DID . . .," "But SARAH wasn't able to do THAT . . ." Karen sets herself up as a "do-er" and Sarah as not a "do-er." Of course, Karen could have formulated her language quite differently had she wanted to. She could, for example, have said something like: "I called Sarah and, while we both had expected to be around for the Summer Institute, I was able to attend, but Sarah couldn't make it." Notice that this way of putting matters backgrounds the expectation they each had of being available to attend the Institute (placing it in a subordinate clause attached to "I was able to attend, but Sarah couldn't make it," rather than making it a main clause as Karen does). This formulation does not emphasize doing on Karen's part by using "did" and it formulates Sarah's lack of attendance in a way that does not stress her inability to come, but makes it sound as if something came up over which she had less control ("couldn't make it"). This alternative way still does not, of course, completely mitigate the contrast, but it softens it, nonetheless.

Identities

What identity is Karen trying to take on or enact? We have already seen how Karen enacts in her language an identity as a responsible do-er. In addition, she contextualizes this agentive/responsible identity in terms of her depiction of the dialog with the curriculum coordinator. The coordinator says "*We have* a person from Woodson . . .," sounding as if they have a problem on their hands. She turns to Karen as the responsible party to handle the matter: "Give her a call." The dialog with the curriculum coordinator leaves the implication that Karen is the teacher with the most expertise or responsibility to deal with a university professor who wants to do research on "black history in New Derby" and "get involved with the school."

Relationships

What relationship is Karen trying to enact in regard to Sarah? From what we have

said so far it is clear that Karen is enacting a distanced, but not particularly deferential, relationship to Sarah. The contrast, of herself as “do-er” and Sarah as not a “do-er,” that she creates accomplishes this, but so does the fact that she uses Sarah’s first name both in her introduction to her dialog with the curriculum coordinator and in her concluding remark that “Sarah wasn’t able to do that.” Note, too, that in her portrayal of the dialog with the curriculum coordinator, Karen uses the phrase “a person from Woodson who’s in the History Department,” rather than something like “a Woodson history professor” or “a professor from Woodson’s History Department.” We should note, too, that these references to the historian are made while she is sitting at a small table with the rest of the group, waiting for her turn to talk. We could ask, as well, about what sort of relationship Karen is attempting to create with the group as a whole and with the project they are embarking on.

Politics

What sorts of implications for the distribution of social goods does Karen’s language have? Of course, one social good at stake here is Karen’s and Sarah’s reputations as responsible, trustworthy people. Another is their reputations as “do-ers” or people who fail to do what is needed. Yet another social good at stake – one that is not readily apparent to anyone who does not know the situation better – is who has “rights” to school children. At a much later meeting of the group, the other teacher from Karen’s school (and her close friend) eventually makes it clear that teachers feel that they “own” their children (e.g., she refers to them as “my children”) and that researchers like Sarah should go through teachers (contact them directly) to gain access to their children, not go through an authority figure such as the curriculum coordinator (see Chapter 11 for a discussion of this data). While this became clear only in a later meeting, it helps explain some of how Karen’s language is designed in this short excerpt. The other teachers in the room well know that the way in which the professor (albeit inadvertently) causes the curriculum coordinator to “order” Karen to call her in order to get into Karen’s class was a breach of protocol and they can clearly hear this in her language.

Connections

How is Karen connecting things or making them relevant to each other? How is she disconnecting them or making them not relevant to each other? It is clear by now how Karen renders her attendance at the Institute and Sarah’s lack of attendance connected and relevant to each other (“I DID . . . , we BOTH expected, I DID, but SARAH wasn’t able to do THAT”). Furthermore, she implies that this contrast is relevant to the initial call Sarah made to the school in the way in which she directly juxtaposes Sarah setting the project in motion with that phone call (without Karen’s own initiative) only to fail to attend the an initial event that was meant to facilitate the project and Karen’s involvement.

Sign systems and knowledge

How is Karen privileging or disprivileging specific sign systems (languages, styles of language, non-verbal sign systems) or specific ways of or claims to know and believe? This short excerpt is really the beginning of a long struggle enacted in and through language as to whether teacher knowledge or university professor knowledge in regard to history, teaching history, classrooms, children, and the community is to be privileged – and when, where, and why. This process already starts with the contrast between the use of the curriculum coordinator’s first and last name (Susan Washington) and the professor’s first name only. It is hinted at in the way in which the curriculum coordinator is depicted as saying “a person from Woodson” and “interested in doing some research in black history in New Derby.” Both descriptions are vague. “A person from Woodson” makes it sound as if the curriculum coordinator does not really know the professor and does not cede her the authority of her rank and title. “Some research in black history in New Derby” makes it sound as though either the professor is vague about what research she wants to do (“some research on black history”) or the coordinator doesn’t know or care much what it is exactly (and, it just so happens, the curriculum coordinator is an African-American). In fact, everyone knew from the outset that the professor wanted to do oral history with children studying their own neighborhoods and families – that is, in fact, why Karen was involved, since she already did oral histories with the children in her class. We should keep in mind that what the curriculum coordinator says in Karen’s story is Karen’s depiction for this meeting – with Professor Miller sitting there – of what was said, not necessarily what actually was said.

It is clear that all the building tasks are integrally lined to each other and often mutually supported by the same words and phrases. We have generated some hypotheses from this small piece of data, based on mutual considerations of context and language-in-use. In turn, these hypotheses would guide our search through additional data. Our confidence in these hypotheses will rise if we look through more and more talk from this same group of people in this and subsequent meetings and we gain more and more evidence for our hypotheses – more and more examples that appear to best explained by our hypotheses. If we see these hypotheses further confirmed in other sorts of data – perhaps in other encounters among university professors and teachers in this and other cities – then our confidence will rise yet more. If, in the end, no equally good competing hypotheses are available, then we accept our hypotheses, at least until disconfirming evidence appears, and work on their basis. This is just how all empirical research works. Unlike mathematics, there are no hard “proofs” to be had here.

Our hypotheses make predictions about what we expect to find in further data or in a closer look at our original data. For example, by the end of our excerpt at line 11, we certainly have evidence that Professor Miller could have heard this excerpt as a criticism of herself. She could have heard line 11 as implying she did not have good