

# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Language as action and affiliation

Many people think that the primary purpose of language is to “communicate information.” However, language serves a great many functions and giving and getting information, even in our new Information Age, is by no means the only one. If I had to single out a primary function of human language, it would be not one, but the following two closely related functions: to support the performance of social activities and social identities and to support human affiliation within cultures, social groups, and institutions.

Of course, these two functions are connected. Cultures, social groups, and institutions shape social activities and identities: there are no activities such as “water-cooler gossip sessions” or “corridor politics,” no identities such as water-cooler gossip or corridor politician, without an institution whose water cooler, social arrangements, and corridors are the sites of these activities and identities. At the same time, though, cultures, social groups, and institutions get produced, reproduced, and transformed through human activities and identities. There is no institution unless it is enacted and reenacted moment-by-moment in activities, and the identities connected to them, like “water-cooler gossip sessions,” “corridor politics,” meetings, and numerous other sorts of social interactions, all of which partly have a life of their own apart from larger cultural and institutional forces. Groups and institutions render certain sorts of activities and identities meaningful; certain sorts of activities and identities constitute the nature and existence of specific social groups and institutions.

This book is concerned with a theory and a method for studying how language gets recruited “on site” to enact specific social activities and social identities. By “identities” I mean different ways of participating in different sorts of social groups, cultures, and institutions, for example ways of being a “good student,” an “avid bird watcher,” a “mainstream politician,” a “tough cop,” a (video) “gamer,” and so on and so forth through a nearly endless ever-changing list. In the process, we will see that language-in-use is everywhere and always “political.”

## 2 Introduction

But what do I mean by “political”? We’ve got to be careful here: By “politics,” I don’t mean “Democrats” and “Republicans” or national policy concerns. By “politics” I mean how *social goods* are thought about, argued over, and distributed in society. “Social goods” are anything that a group of people believes to be a source of power, status, value, or worth, whether this be “street smarts,” academic intelligence, money, control, possessions, verbal abilities, “looks,” age, wisdom, knowledge, technology, literacy, morality, “common sense,” and so on through another very long list.

So how does “politics” in this sense get into language-in-use? When we speak or write we always use the grammar of our language to take a particular *perspective* on what the “world” is like. Is this combatant a “freedom fighter” or a “terrorist”? Is Microsoft Windows “loaded with bugs” or did Microsoft “load it with bugs”? Is the glass “half full” or “half empty”? This grammatical perspective-taking process involves us in taking perspectives on what is “normal” or not; what is “acceptable” or not; what is “right” or not; what is “real” or not; what is the “way things are” or not; what is the “ways things ought to be” or not; what is “possible” or not; what “people like us” or “people like them” do or don’t do; and so on and so forth, through another nearly endless list. Being “normal,” “acceptable,” “right,” “real,” “the way things are,” “the ways things ought to be,” “possible,” or “what people like us do,” as opposed to their opposites, are often themselves social goods and all have deep implications for how we believe or wish potential social goods are or ought to be distributed. They have deep implications, as well, for how we act in regard to those beliefs and wishes.

There is nothing special then about politics. Politics is part and parcel of using language. But this does not mean that analyzing language is just an invitation to pontificate about our political views. Far from exonerating us from looking at the empirical details of language and social action, an interest in politics demands that we engage with such details. Politics, in terms of social relations where social goods are at stake, has its lifeblood in such details. It is there that “social goods” are created, sustained, distributed, and redistributed. It is there that people are harmed and helped.

Let me give a brief example of how language details lead to social activities, identities, and politics, far beyond “giving and getting information.” My example here will involve a written text, though most of the examples later in this book will come from speech. Consider the following sentences, chosen at random from Paul Gagnon’s book (Gagnon 1987). I have bolded some aspects of the text that I will discuss below:

**Also secure, by 1689**, was the principle of representative government, as tested against the two criteria for valid constitutions proposed in the previous chapter. **As to the first criterion**, there was a genuine balance of power in English society, expressing itself in the Whig and Tory parties. **As narrowly**

**confined to the privileged classes as these were**, they nonetheless represented different factions and tendencies. Elections meant real choice among separate, contending parties and personalities.

In his book, sponsored by the American Federation of Teachers, the Education Excellence Network, and Freedom House, Gagnon speaks to what he thinks ought to be the “essential plot” of Western history as it should be taught in our schools. In the sentences quoted above, Gagnon uses certain aspects of English grammar as a resource with which to “design” his sentences in a way that will make them do the social work he wants them to do.

In English, the subject of a sentence is normally placed at the beginning of the sentence, as in “Elections meant real choice,” where “elections” is the subject of the sentence. Gagnon uses the resources of English grammar to see to it that the *subject* of his sentences is not in its “normal” place at the beginning of the sentence, except for his last sentence, whose subject (“elections”) is at the beginning. I have bolded the beginnings of the other sentences, none of which is the subject of those sentences. It is clear that Gagnon’s use of English grammar to design his text in this way creates connections in his text, allowing it to flow from sentence to sentence in a rather artful way. However, Gagnon’s use of English grammar does much more than this.

The subject of a sentence, usually the first thing in the sentence, is the topic we want to say something about. Sometimes, however, we place material that is not the subject/topic of the sentence in initial position, rather than the subject, as in “At least in Italy, elections mean real choice,” where the phrase “at least in Italy” has been placed at the front of the sentence. Such “fronted” material – material that is at the front of the sentence, but is not the subject of the sentence – functions as a *background context* and launching off point against which other later information is *foregrounded* as the main or focal point. Thus, in our example (“At least in Italy, elections mean real choice”), the main focal claim “elections mean real choice” is contextualized within the background assumption that we are talking about or limiting our claim to “at least in Italy.”

Thus, in Gagnon’s text, material such as “Also secure, by 1689” and “As to the first criterion” is background material, launching off points and context from within which later more focal information is to be viewed and evaluated. Placed where they are, these phrases allow Gagnon to “flow” to his main foregrounded information in each sentence (i.e., to representative government as he has defined it earlier and the balance of power represented by the Tories and Whigs), while providing the contextual scaffolding needed to frame his main points (or, as we will see below, “cushion” them).

Having used such “backgrounding–foregrounding” devices twice (and several times earlier), Gagnon does it again in the sentence “**As narrowly confined to the privileged classes as these were**, they [the Whig and Tory parties] nonethe-

less represented different factions and tendencies.” This allows him to treat the fact that the Whig and Tory parties were confined “to the privileged classes” as connecting tissue and background information, a mere concession, despite the fact that some other historians might see this as a focal piece of information. His final sentence about elections can now be issued with no “background.” The major reason to contest that these were meaningful elections has already been relegated to the background.

In other words, Gagnon has relegated to a “background consideration” what some other historians would have placed in the foreground of their arguments. These historians would see narrow class privilege as calling into question the nature of elections based on such privilege. They would have designed their language to background and foreground things differently. Perhaps they would have written something like “Though the Whig and Tory parties differed on some issues [background], they were narrowly confined to the privileged classes and represented only their interests [foreground].” These historians and Gagnon differ not over facts, but over what should be at the center or focus of our attention. We can really only understand Gagnon deeply and critically if we understand his ways with words in relationship to the different ways with words of other historians, historians who might claim, for instance, that elections are not meaningful or democratic if confined to elites.

Am I accusing Gagnon of using English grammar for “political purposes”? If by this we mean that I am saying that Gagnon is using the resources of English grammar to create a *perspective* with implications, the answer is most certainly “yes.” But it could not be otherwise. The whole point of grammar, in speech or writing, is in fact to allow us to create just such political perspectives. Grammar simply does not allow us to speak or write from no perspective at all.

Is Gagnon “just” communicating information? Hardly. He is engaging in a very real social activity, a project, an attempt to create new affiliations and transform old ones over who will teach and what will be taught in the schools, and over what is and what is not “real history” or “correct history.” This, too, could not be otherwise. To read Gagnon without regard for the way he recruits grammatical features for his social and, yes, political purposes is to have missed most of the action. In fact, we can hardly have a discussion with Gagnon, engage with his views, if we have missed this action.

Gagnon is also, in and through language, enacting a specific social identity as a particular type of historian (against other types of historians), a historian who connects history, citizenship, patriotism, and schools together in a certain way. We might call him a “traditional” or “conservative” historian. Furthermore, his text is only a part of a larger project in which he was engaged, a project in setting standards for school history and fighting the “history wars” against those who hold radically different perspectives on the nature, purposes, and goals of history, schooling, and society than he does.

Note, too, by the way, that a historian who wants to “rise above” debates about standards in public schools and “history wars” and write as an “objective” and “dispassionate” scholar, simply retelling the “facts,” will only have designed a text whose language enacts a different set of perspectives and a different politics. That text will be designed to render texts like Gagnon’s “unprofessional,” “mere politics,” “just about schools,” not “real history.” Writing as if all you have to offer are “the facts” or “the truth” is also *a way of writing*, a way of using language to enact an activity and an identity, too.

This does not mean that “nothing is true” or that “everything is equally good.” No, for better or worse, physicists’ bombs do go off and astrologists’ don’t. Rather, it means that “truth” (which I would define as doing better, rather than worse, in not getting physically, socially, culturally, or morally “bitten” by the world) is a matter of taking, negotiating, and contesting perspectives created in and through language.

What I want readers to get from this example is that speakers and writers use the resources of grammar to *design* their sentences and texts in ways that communicate their perspectives on reality, carry out various social activities (e.g., in Gagnon’s case, trying to enforce the teaching of certain sorts of history in schools), and allow them to enact different social identities (e.g., in Gagnon’s case, being a certain type of historian). We are all designers – artists, in a sense – in this respect. Our medium is language.

## 1.2 About this book: theory and method

Now it is time to turn to some “truth in lending” disclaimers. These are all the more appropriate here, as this book is meant to “lend” readers certain tools of inquiry, fully anticipating that these tools will be transformed, or even abandoned, as readers invent their own versions of them or meld them with other tools embedded in different perspectives.

This book is an introduction to *one* approach to discourse analysis (the analysis of language-in-use). There are many different approaches to discourse analysis (see, for example, Schiffrin 1994; van Dijk 1997a,b; Jaworski and Coupland 1999; Wodak and Meyer 2002; Fairclough 2003; Tannen *et al.* 2003; Rogers 2004), none of them, including this one, uniquely “right.” Different approaches fit different issues and questions better or worse than others. And, too, different approaches sometimes reach similar conclusions though using different tools and terminologies connected to different “micro-communities” of researchers.

Furthermore, the approach to discourse analysis taken in this book is not “mine.” No set of research tools and no theory belongs to a single person, no matter how much academic style and our own egos sometimes tempt us to write that way. I have freely begged, borrowed, and patched together. If there is any quality in my work, it is primarily in the “taste” with which I have raided others’ stores and in

the way I have adapted and mixed together the ingredients and, thereby, made the soup. Some will, of course, not recognize the ingredient they have contributed, or, at least, not want to admit they do after they taste my soup. If there are occasional inventions, their only chance for a full life is that someone else will borrow them and mix them into new soup.

A note on the soup: the approach to discourse analysis in this book seeks to balance talk about the mind, talk about social interaction and activities, and talk about society and institutions more than is the case in some other approaches. So some may think my approach too “cognitive,” others may think it too “social” (for my work on language and learning in social and cognitive terms, see Gee 2003, 2004). However, I believe we have to get minds, bodies, social interactions, social groups, and institutions all in the soup together.

This book is partly about a method of research. However, I hasten to point out that the whole issue of research “methods” is, as far as I am concerned, badly confused. First of all, any method always goes with a *theory*. Method and theory cannot be separated, despite the fact that methods are often taught as if they could stand alone. Any method of research is a way to investigate some particular domain. In this case, the domain is language-in-use. There can be no sensible method to study a domain unless one also has a theory of what that domain is. Thus, this book offers, as it must, a theory about the nature of language-in-use.

People with different theories about a domain will use different methods for their research. The reason this is so is because a research method is made up of various “tools of inquiry” and strategies for applying them. Tools of inquiry are designed to describe and explain what the researcher takes to exist and to be important in a domain. Thus, when theories about a domain differ – for instance, a theory about what language-in-use is or about what evolution is – tools of inquiry will differ as well. For example, if your theory is that evolution works at the level of cells, you will use different methods of research in biology than if you believe it works at the level of genes. You will have different methods again if you believe it operates at the level of species.

Besides seeing that methods change with theories, it is important, as well, to see that research, whether in physics, literary criticism, or discourse analysis, is not an algorithmic procedure; it is not a set of “rules” that can be followed step-by-linear-step to get guaranteed results. There is no “scientific method,” even in the “hard” sciences, if by this we mean such a set of rules to follow. Rather, research adopts and adapts specific tools of inquiry and strategies for implementing them. These tools and strategies ultimately reside in a “community of practice” formed by those engaged in such research.

Such tools and strategies are continually and flexibly adapted to specific issues, problems, and contexts of study. They are continually transformed as they are applied in practice. At the same time, new researchers in an area are normed by examples of research that more advanced researchers in the area take (for the time)

to be “prototypical” examples of that area’s tools and strategies in operation (see Mishler 1990, a now classic paper). Methods are through and through social and communal.

This book will introduce various tools of inquiry for what I will call “D/discourse analysis” and strategies for using them (and in a moment I will say why the odd “D/d”). It will give a number of examples of the tools in action, as well. But the reader should keep in mind that these tools of inquiry are not meant to be rigid definitions. Rather, they are meant to be “thinking devices” that guide inquiry in regard to specific sorts of data and specific sorts of issues and questions. They are meant to be adapted for the reader’s own purposes. They are meant, as well, to be transformed as the reader adapts them to his or her own theory of the domain. Of course, if the reader’s theory gets too far away from my theory of the domain, the tools will be less and less easily or sensibly adaptable and useful.

The distinction between “Discourse” with a “big D” and “discourse” with a “little d” plays a role throughout this book. This distinction is meant to do this: we, as “applied linguists” or “sociolinguists,” are interested in how language is used “on site” to enact activities and identities. Such language-in-use I will call “discourse” with a “little d.” But activities and identities are rarely ever enacted through language alone.

To “pull off” being an “X” doing “Y” (e.g., a Los Angeles Latino street-gang member warning another gang member off his territory, or a laboratory physicist convincing colleagues that a particular graph supports her ideas, or, for that matter, a laboratory physicist warning another laboratory physicist off her research territory), it is not enough to get just the words “right,” though that is crucial. It is also necessary to get one’s body, clothes, gestures, actions, interactions, symbols, tools, technologies (be they guns or graphs), values, attitudes, beliefs, and emotions “right,” as well, and all at the “right” places and times.

When “little d” discourse (language-in-use) is melded integrally with non-language “stuff” to enact specific identities and activities, then I say that “big D” Discourses are involved. We are all members of many, a great many, different Discourses, Discourses which often influence each other in positive and negative ways, and which sometimes breed with each other to create new hybrids. When you “pull off” being a culturally specific sort of “everyday” person, a “regular” at the local bar, a certain type of African-American or Greek-Australian, a certain type of cutting-edge particle physicist or teenage heavy-metal enthusiast, a teacher or a student of a certain sort, or any of a great many other “ways of being in the world,” you use language and “other stuff” – ways of acting, interacting, feeling, believing, valuing, and using various sorts of objects, symbols, tools, and technologies – to recognize yourself and others as meaning and meaningful in certain ways. In turn, you produce, reproduce, sustain, and transform a given “form of life” or Discourse. All life for all of us is just a patchwork of thoughts, words, objects, events, actions, and interactions in Discourses.



So, this book will introduce tools of inquiry with which to study discourse in Discourses. Finally, let me say that in D/discourse analysis we are not interested in specific analyses of data just in and for themselves. A D/discourse analysis must have a point. We are not interested in simply describing data so that we can admire the intricacy of language, though such intricacy is indeed admirable. Rather, we are interested, beyond description, in two things: (a) illuminating and gaining evidence for our theory of the domain, a theory that helps to explain how and why language works the way it does when it is put into action; and (b) contributing, in terms of understanding and intervention, to important issues and problems in some “applied” area (e.g., education) that interests and motivates the researcher.

Thanks to the fact that D/discourse analyses must have a “point,” this book will have relevance to “applied” issues throughout, though these issues are not always in the foreground of attention. In D/discourse analysis, any idea that applications and practice are less prestigious or less important or less “pure” than theory has no place. Such a notion has no place, because, as the reader will see, the theory of language in this book is that *language has meaning only in and through social practices*, practices which often leave us morally complicit with harm and injustice unless we attempt to transform them. It is a tenet of this book that any proper theory of language is a theory of practice.

### 1.3 About this book: readers and reading

This book is directed at three audiences. It is meant to introduce students and researchers in other areas to one form of discourse analysis that I hope they can use and experiment with as they learn other forms of discourse analysis and come up with their own ideas. It is meant, as well, for people interested in language, culture, and institutions, but who have not focused their own work on discourse analysis. Finally, it is meant for my colleagues in discourse studies, so that they can compare and contrast their own views to those developed here, and so that, together, we can advance our common enterprise of understanding how language works in society to create better and worse worlds, institutions, and human relationships.

The book is structured in a somewhat odd way. The “method” is fully sketched out in Chapter 7. Each of Chapters 2–6 discusses, with many examples, specific tools of inquiry that are part of the overall method and strategies for using them. These tools and strategies are fully embedded in a theory of language-in-use in culture and society. Thus, that theory is also laid out in Chapters 2–6. Chapter 7 briefly recapitulates our tools of inquiry and places them in the framework of an overall approach to D/discourse analysis. I also discuss the issue of validity for D/discourse analysis in this chapter.

Chapter 8 deals with some linguistic details (various aspects of grammar and discourse) that play an important role in D/discourse analysis. Here issues about how speech is planned and produced are taken up. These linguistic details will, hopefully,



make more sense once the “big picture” is made clear in Chapters 2–7, and will give readers some additional tools with which to deal with the empirical details of discourse analysis. Chapters 9–11 are extended examples of D/discourse analysis using some of the tools and strategies developed earlier in the book. These chapters are by no means meant to be any sort of step-by-step “how to” manual; they are simply meant to exemplify in practice a few of the tools discussed in this book.

My analyses throughout this book do not assume any specific theory of grammar or, for that matter, any great depth of knowledge about grammar. However, readers may want to supplement their reading of this book with some additional reading about grammar, preferably grammar as it functions in communication and social interaction. The best known such “functional” approach to grammar is that developed by M. A. K. Halliday (1994). Good introductory secondary sources exist on Halliday’s approach to grammar (e.g., see Martin *et al.* 1997; Thompson 2004). For readers who want a quick overview of technical matters about how grammar works in communication and social interaction, I have given a brief introduction to this topic as an appendix to this book. Different readers may want to read this appendix at different points in the reading of the main material in the book.

Since this book is meant to be an “introduction,” I have tried not to clutter up the chapters with long lists of interpolated references. The downside of this policy is that I will have to leave out references to the more specialized work of many colleagues whose work I value greatly. The upside is that people new to discourse analysis may actually read some of the material I cite and will have good places to start their further investigations. The material I do cite is, in most cases, replete with further references to the literature. Some chapters end with a note containing further references to the literature. Otherwise, I have eschewed footnotes.

Since the word “method” so triggers in our minds ideas of a “step-by-step” set of “rules” to follow, I want to stress, once again, in closing, that that is not what “method” means here. Rather, it means sets of “thinking devices” with which one can investigate certain sorts of questions, with due regard for how others have investigated such questions, but with adaptation, innovation, and creativity as well. “Validity” is communal: if you take risks and make mistakes, your colleagues will help you clean up the mess – that’s what they’re there for. The quality of research often resides in how fruitful our mistakes are: that is, in whether they open up paths on which others can then make more progress than we have.

Finally, having repeatedly used the term “D/discourse analysis” above to make the point that we are interested in analyzing language as it is fully integrated with all the other elements that go into social practices (ways of thinking or feeling, ways of manipulating objects or tools, ways of using non-linguistic symbol systems, etc.), we can now dispense with this cumbersome term. It will just clutter up the text and the point is now made. Throughout this book I will usually simply use the phrase “discourse analysis,” but will mean by this phrase analyses that deal with both “little d” discourse and “big D” Discourse.

## 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

reasons for not attending the Summer Institute. We would certainly want to look closely at Professor Miller's reaction at this point, both verbally and non-verbally (which is why it is good to videotape and not just audiotape data).

When we go back and look further at our recordings, we see, from both verbal and non-verbal cues, that Professor Miller attempts to interrupt Karen at just the point at which Karen stresses the word "that" at the end of line 11. The professor gives a small laugh and says, in a low voice, "I heard . . . how did you get . ." Karen speaks right through the attempted interruption, cutting it off, saying "Well, so Sarah and I talked a little bit about what her plans were and sort of what our expectations were." We don't know, of course, what the professor wanted to say, but it is clear that she had heard the end of line 11 as a point at which she wanted to stop Karen and interject something.

In the end, in the research from which this data came, the hypotheses we have begun to formulate here were richly supported by more and more data as the project went on. These hypotheses, in turn, helped discourse researchers understand how and why the project, at various points, was failing and allowed them to help make things work a bit better. Could they make it "perfect"? Of course not. Some of the problems and issues (largely to do with status, power, and institutional conflicts) our hypotheses point to are entrenched problems in the real world and would require substantive social and institutional changes to remove. But that doesn't mean we can't do anything and it doesn't mean we can't start on the process of institutional change.

In Chapter 7 I will elaborate on the seven "building tasks" I have introduced here and their relevance for discourse analysis. But in the next three chapters, I want to develop several "tools of inquiry" – ways of looking at language-in-use that will help us study how these building tasks are carried out and with what social and political consequences.

## 3 Tools of inquiry and discourses

### 3.1 Tools

In the last chapter we looked at seven “building tasks,” that is, seven areas or things that we use language to build. We now turn to some tools we can use to analyze the workings of these building tasks in specific instances of language-in-use. The tools of inquiry I introduce in this chapter are primarily relevant to how people build identities and activities and recognize identities and activities that others are building around them. However, the tools of inquiry introduced here are most certainly caught up with all the other building tasks we discussed in the last chapter, as well, and we will see this progressively throughout this book.

The tools of inquiry to be discussed in this chapter are described below.

#### *“Social languages”*

People use different styles or varieties of language for different purposes. They use different varieties of language to enact and recognize different identities in different settings; they also use different varieties of language to engage in all the other building tasks discussed in the last chapter. I will call each such variety a “social language.” For example, a student studying hornworms might say in everyday language, a variety of language often referred to as “vernacular language,” something like “Hornworms sure vary a lot in how big they get,” while the same student might use a more technical variety of language to say or write something like “Hornworm growth exhibits a significant amount of variation.” The vernacular version is one social language and the technical version is another. Investigating how different social languages are used and mixed is one tool of inquiry for engaging in discourse analysis.

#### *“Discourses”*

People build identities and activities not just through language but by using language together with other “stuff” that isn’t language. If you want to get recognized as a

street-gang member of a certain sort you have to speak in the “right” way, but you have to act and dress in the “right” way, as well. You also have to engage (or, at least, behave as if you are engaging) in characteristic ways of thinking, acting, interacting, valuing, feeling, and believing. You also have to use or be able to use various sorts of symbols (e.g., graffiti), tools (e.g., a weapon), and objects (e.g., street corners) in the “right” places and at the “right” times. You can’t just “talk the talk,” you have to “walk the walk” as well. The same is true of doing/being a corporate lawyer, Marine sergeant, radical feminist, or a regular at the local bar. One and the same person might talk, act, and interact in such a way as to get recognized as a “street-gang member” in one context and, in another context, talk, act, and interact in quite different ways so as to get recognized as a “gifted student.” And, indeed, these two identities, and their concomitant ways of talking, acting, and interacting, may well conflict with each other in some circumstances (in which different people expect different identities from the person), as well as in the person’s own mind. I use the term “Discourse,” with a capital “D,” for 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. Thinking about the different Discourses a piece of language is part of is another tool for engaging in discourse analysis.

### ***Intertextuality***

When we speak or write, our words often allude to or relate to, in some fashion, other “texts” or certain types of “texts,” where by “texts” I mean words that other people have said or written. For example, *Wired* magazine once printed a story with this title: “The New Face of the Silicon Age: Tech jobs are fleeing to India faster than ever. You got a problem with that?” (February 2004). The sentence “You got a problem with that?” reminds us of “tough guy” talk we have heard in many movies or read in books. It intrigues us that such talk occurs written in a magazine devoted to technology. This sort of cross-reference to another text or type of text I will refer to as “intertextuality.” In instances of intertextuality, one spoken or written text alludes to, quotes, or otherwise relates to, another one.

### ***“Conversations”***

Sometimes when we talk or write, our words don’t just allude or relate to someone else’s words (as in the case of intertextuality), but to themes, debates, or motifs that have been the focus of much talk and writing in some social group with which we are familiar or in our society as a whole. These themes, debates, or motifs play a role in how language is interpreted. For example, how do you know that when I tell you “Smoking is associated with health problems” I mean to say that smoking leads to health problems and not that health problems lead people to smoke because,

say, their health problems are making them nervous and they are smoking in order to calm down (the most probable meaning for a sentence like “Writing a will is associated with health problems”)? You know this because you are well aware of the long-running discussions in our society over the ill-effects of smoking. I refer to all the talk and writing that has gone on in a specific social group or in society at large around a major theme, debate, or motif as a “Conversation” with a capital “C,” using the term metaphorically, of course. Most of us today are aware of the societal Conversations going on around us about things like abortion, creationism, global warming, terrorism, and so on and so forth through many other issues. To know about these Conversations is to know about the various sides one can take in debates about these issues and what sorts of people are usually on each side. As members of various social groups and of our society as a whole, we are privy (know something about) to a great many such Conversations. People interpret our language – and we interpret theirs – partly through such knowledge. Thinking about the different Conversations a piece of language impinges on or relates to is another tool for engaging in discourse analysis.

### 3.2 Discourses: *whos* and *whats*

Let’s start by trying to get at the notion of a “big D” Discourse. We begin with the question of *who* you are when you speak or write and *what* you are doing. When you speak or write anything, you use the resources of English to project yourself as a certain kind of person, a different kind in different circumstances. You also project yourself as engaged in a certain kind of activity, a different kind in different circumstances. If I have no idea who you are and what you are doing, then I cannot make sense of what you have said, written, or done.

You project a different identity at a formal dinner party than you do at the family dinner table. And, though these are both dinner, they are nonetheless different activities. The fact that people have differential access to different identities and activities, connected to different sorts of status and social goods, is a root source of inequality in society. Intervening in such matters can be a contribution to social justice. Since different identities and activities are enacted in and through language, the study of language is integrally connected to matters of equity and justice.

An oral or written “utterance” has meaning, then, only if and when it communicates a *who* and a *what* (Wieder and Pratt 1990a). What I mean by a “who” is a *socially situated identity*, the “kind of person” one is seeking to be and enact here-and-now. What I mean by a “what” is a socially situated *activity* that the utterance helps to constitute. Such identities and activities are, of course, two of the building tasks we discussed in Chapter 2.

Lots of interesting complications can set in when we think about identity enacted in and through language. *Whos* can be multiple and they need not always be people. The President’s press secretary can issue an utterance that is, in fact, authored by



a speech writer and authorized (and even claimed) by the President. In this case, the utterance communicates a sort of overlapping and compound *who*. The press secretary, even if she is directly quoting the speech writer, must inflect the remark with her own voice. In turn, the speech writer is both “mimicking” the President’s “voice” and creating an identity for him.

Not just individuals, but also institutions, through the “anonymous” texts and products they circulate, can author or issue “utterances.” For example, we will see below that the warning on an aspirin bottle actually communicates multiple *whos*. An utterance can be authored, authorized by, or issued by a group or a single individual.

Finally, we can point out that *whos* and *whats* are not really discrete and separable. You are *who* you are partly through *what* you are doing and *what* you are doing is partly recognized for what it is by *who* is doing it. So it is better, in fact, to say that utterances communicate an integrated, though often multiple or “heteroglossic,” *who-doing-what*.

### 3.3 “Real Indians”

Though I have focused on language, thus far, it is important to see that making visible and recognizable *who* we are and *what* we are doing always requires more than language. It requires, as well, that we act, think, value, and interact in ways that together with language render *who* we are and *what* we are doing recognizable to others (and ourselves). In fact, to be a particular *who* and to pull off a particular *what* requires that we act, value, interact, and use language *in sync with* or *in coordination with* other people and with various objects (“props”) in appropriate locations and at appropriate times.

To see this wider notion of language as integrated with “other stuff” (other people, objects, values, times and places), we will briefly consider Wieder and Pratt’s (1990a,b) fascinating work on how Native Americans recognize each other as “really Indian” (their work is based on a variety of different groups, though no claim is made that it is true of all Native American groups). Wieder and Pratt point out that real Indians “refer to persons who are ‘really Indian’ in just those words with regularity and standardization” (Wieder and Pratt 1990a: 48). Wieder and Pratt’s work will also make clear how the identities (the *whos*) we take on are flexibly negotiated in actual contexts of practice.

The term “real Indian” is, of course, an “insiders’ term.” The fact that it is used by some Native Americans in enacting their own identity work does not license non-Native Americans to use the term. Thus, though it may clutter the text, I will below always place the term “real Indian” in quotes to make clear that I am talking about the term and not claiming that I have the “right” to actually use it of anyone. Finally, let me say that I am not discussing Native Americans here because I think they are “esoteric.” In fact, I am using this example, because I think it is a clear and dramatic example of what we *all* do all the time, though in different ways.

The problem of “recognition and being recognized” is very consequential and problematic for Native Americans. While, in order to be considered a “real Indian,” one must be able to make some claims to kinship with others who are recognized as “real Indians,” this by no means settles the matter. People with such (biological) ties can fail to get recognized as a “really Indian,” and people of mixed kinship can be so recognized.

A “real Indian” is not something one can simply be. Rather, it something that one becomes or is *in the doing* of it, that is, in the performance. Though one must have certain kinship ties to get in the “game,” beyond this entry criterion, there is no *being* (once and for all) a “real Indian,” rather there is only *doing being-or-becoming-a-“real-Indian.”* If one does not continue to “practice” being a “real Indian,” one ceases to be one.

Finally, “doing” being-or-becoming-a-“real-Indian” is not something that one can do all by oneself. It requires the participation of others. One cannot be a “real Indian” unless one appropriately recognizes other “real Indians” and gets recognized by others as a “real Indian” in the practices of doing being-or-becoming-a-“real-Indian.” Being a “real Indian” also requires appropriate accompanying objects (props), times, and places.

There are a multitude of ways one can do being-and-becoming-a-“real-Indian.” Some of these are (following Wieder and Pratt 1990a,b): “Real Indians” prefer to avoid conversation with strangers, Native American or otherwise. They cannot be related to one another as “mere acquaintances,” as some “non-Indians” might put it. So, for “real Indians,” any conversation they do have with a stranger who may turn out to be a “real Indian” will, in the discovery of the other’s “Indianness,” establish substantial obligations between the conversational partners just through the mutual acknowledgment that they are “Indians” and that they are now no longer strangers to one another.

In their search for the other’s “real Indianness” and in their display of their own “Indianness,” “real Indians” frequently engage in a distinctive form of verbal sparring. By correctly responding to and correctly engaging in this sparring, which “Indians” call “razzing,” each participant further establishes cultural competency in the eyes of the other.

“Real Indians” manage face-to-face relations with others in such a way that they appear to be in agreement with them (or, at least, they do not overtly disagree); they are modest and “fit in.” They show accord and harmony and are reserved about their own interests, skills, attainments, and positions. “Real Indians” understand that they should not elevate themselves over other “real Indians.” And they understand that the complex system of obligations they have to kin and other “real Indians” takes priority over those contractual obligations and pursuit of self-interest that some “non-Indians” prize so highly.

“Real Indians” must be competent in “doing their part” in participating in conversations that begin with the participants’ exchanging greetings and other ameni-

ties and then lapsing into extended periods of silence. They must know that neither they nor the others have an obligation to speak – that silence on the part of all conversants is permissible.

When they are among “Indians,” “real Indians” must also be able to perform in the roles of “student” and “teacher” and be able to recognize the behaviors appropriate to these roles. These roles are brought into play exclusively when the appropriate occasion arises for transmitting cultural knowledge (i.e., things pertinent to being a “real Indian”). Although many “non-Indians” find it proper to ask questions of someone who is instructing them, “Indians” regard questions in such a situation as being inattentive, rude, insolent, and so forth. The person who has taken the role of “student” shows attentiveness by avoiding eye contact and by being silent. The teaching situation, then, as a witnessed monolog, lacks the dialogical features that characterize some Western instruction.

While the above sort of information gives us something of the flavor of what sorts of things one must do and say to get recognized as a “real Indian,” such information can lead to a bad mistake. It can sound as if the above features are necessary and sufficient criteria for doing being-and-becoming-a-“real-Indian.” But this is not true.

These features are not a test that can be or ever is administered all at once, and once and for all, to determine who is or is not a “real Indian.” Rather, the circumstances under which these features are employed by “Indians” emerge over the course of a developing history among groups of people. They are employed always in the context of actual situations, and at different times in the life history of groups of people. The ways in which the judgment “He (or she) is (or is not) a ‘real Indian’” is embedded within situations that motivate it make such judgments intrinsically provisional. Those now recognized can spoil their acceptance or have it spoiled and those not now accepted can have another chance, even when others are reluctant to extend it.

The same thing applies, in fact, in regard to many other social identities, not just being “a real Indian.” There are no once and for all tests for who is a “real” feminist, gang member, patriot, humanist, cutting-edge scientist, “yuppie,” or “regular” at the local bar. These matters are settled provisionally and continually, in practice, as part and parcel of shared histories and ongoing activities. When I was young, my community certainly had tests through which we continually, always provisionally, and sometimes contentiously, displayed and recognized who was and was not a “real Catholic” (versus being a “Catholic in name only” or being a non-Catholic). That community and those tests have, over the last several decades, changed radically, however much we then viewed them as static and eternal.

Different social identities (different *whos*) may seriously conflict with one another. For instance, Scollon and Scollon (1981) point out that, for the Native Americans they studied (Athabaskans in Canada and the US), writing essays, a practice common in school, can constitute a crisis in identity. To produce an essay requires the Athabaskan to produce a major self-display, which is appropriate to Athabaskans

only when a person is in a position of dominance in relation to the audience (in the case of school, this is the teacher, not the student).

Furthermore, in essayist prose, the audience and the author are “fictionalized” (not really me and you, but decontextualized and rather generic “types” of readers and writers) and the text is decontextualized from specific social networks and relationships. Where the relationship of the communicants is decontextualized and unknown, Athabaskans prefer silence.

The paradox of prose for Athabaskans, the Scollons point out, is that if it is communication between known author and audience it is contextualized and compatible with Athabaskan values, but not good essayist prose. To the extent that it becomes decontextualized and thus good essayist prose, it becomes uncharacteristic of Athabaskans to seek to communicate. What is required to do and be an Athabaskan is in large part mutually exclusive with what is required to do and be a writer of school-based essayist prose. This doesn’t mean that Athabaskans cannot do both (remember, we are all multiple), it simply means that they may face very real conflicts in terms of values and identity. And, as the Scollons point out, many other groups of people have similar or related “identity issues” with essayist literacy.

### 3.4 Discourses (with a big “D”)

So how does someone get recognized as a “real Indian” (a *who*) engaged in verbal sparring of the sort “real Indians” do (a *what*)? Such matters are consequential, as we said above: “By correctly responding to and correctly engaging in this sparring, which ‘Indians’ call ‘razzing,’ each participant further establishes cultural competency in the eyes of the other.” This is a problem of “recognition and being recognized.”

The problem of “recognition and being recognized” is very consequential not only for Native Americans, but for all of us all the time. And, as we saw above, making visible and recognizable *who* we are and *what* we are doing always involves a great deal more than “just language.” It involves acting-interacting-thinking-valuing-talking-(sometimes writing-reading) in the “appropriate way” with the “appropriate” props at the “appropriate” times in the “appropriate” places.

Such socially accepted associations among ways of using language, of thinking, valuing, acting, and interacting, in the “right” places and at the “right” times with the “right” objects (associations that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or “social network”), I will refer to as “Discourses,” with a capital “D” (Gee 1990a, 1992, 1996; see also Foucault 1985; Bourdieu 1990a). I will reserve the word “discourse,” with a little “d,” to mean language-in-use or stretches of language (like conversations or stories). “Big D” Discourses are always language *plus* “other stuff.”

There are innumerable Discourses in any modern, technological, urban-based society: for example, (enacting) being something as general as a type of African-

American or Anglo-Australian or something as specific as a type of modern British young second-generation affluent Sikh woman. Being a type of middle-class American, factory worker, or executive, doctor or hospital patient, teacher, administrator, or student, student of physics or of literature, member of a club or street gang, regular at the local bar, or, as we have just seen, “real Indian” are all Discourses.

The key to Discourses is “recognition.” If you put language, action, interaction, values, beliefs, symbols, objects, tools, and places together in such a way that others *recognize* you as a particular type of who (identity) engaged in a particular type of what (activity), here-and-now, then you have pulled off a Discourse (and thereby continued it through history, if only for a while longer). Whatever you have done must be similar enough to other performances to be recognizable. However, if it is different enough from what has gone before, but still recognizable, it can simultaneously change and transform Discourses. If it is not recognizable, then you’re not “in” the Discourse.

Discourses are always embedded in a medley of social institutions, and often involve various “props” such as books and magazines of various sorts, laboratories, classrooms, buildings of various sorts, various technologies, and a myriad of other objects from sewing needles (for sewing circles) through birds (for bird watchers) to basketball courts and basketballs (for basketball players). Think of all the words, symbols, deeds, objects, clothes, and tools you need to coordinate in the right way at the right time and place to “pull off” (or recognize someone as) being a cutting-edge particle physicist or a Los Angeles Latino street-gang member or a sensitive high-culture humanist (of old).

It is sometimes helpful to think about social and political issues as if it is not just us humans who are talking and interacting with each other, but, rather, the Discourses we represent and enact, and for which we are “carriers.” The Discourses we enact existed before each of us came on the scene and most of them will exist long after we have left the scene. Discourses, through our words and deeds, have talked to each other through history, and, in doing so, form human history.

Think, for instance, of the long-running and ever-changing historical interchange in the USA and Canada between the Discourses of “being an Indian” and “being an Anglo” or of the different, but equally long-running, historical interchange in New Zealand between “being a Maori” and “being an Anglo” (or, for that matter, think of the long-running interchange between “being a British Anglo” and “being an American Anglo”). Think of the long-running and ever-changing interchange between creationists and biologists. Think of the long-running and ever-changing interchange in Los Angeles between African-American teenage gang members and the Los Angeles police (some of whom, for instance, are leading experts, even academically speaking, on the “grammar” of gang graffiti, which varies significantly, by the way, between African-American gangs and Latino gangs). Intriguingly, we

humans are very often unaware of the history of these interchanges, and, thus, in a deep sense, not fully aware of what we mean when we act and talk.

When we discussed being a “real Indian,” we argued that “knowing how” to be a “real Indian” rests on one’s being able to “be in sync with other ‘real Indians’” and with objects (e.g., the material items of the culture) in the appropriate times and places. Recent studies of science suggest much the same thing is true for scientists.

For example, these studies argue that the physics experimental physicists “know” is, in large part, *not* in their heads. Rather, it is spread out (distributed), inscribed in (and often trapped in) apparatus, symbolic systems, books, papers, and journals, institutions, habits of bodies, routines of practice, and other people (Latour 1987; Traweek 1988). Each domain of practice, each scientific Discourse — for example, a specific area within physics or biology — *attunes* actions, expressions, objects, and people (the scientists themselves) so that they become “workable” *in relation* to each other (Knorr Cetina 1992). They are “in sync.”

Just as there are verbal and non-verbal ways to be a “real Indian,” there are verbal and non-verbal ways to be a “real experimental physicist.” Being an experimental physicist or being a “real Indian” are ways with words, feelings, values, beliefs, emotions, people, actions, things, tools, and places that allow us to display and recognize characteristic *whos* doing characteristic *whats*. They are both, then, Discourses.

The scientist’s “knowhow” is the ability to *coordinate and be coordinated by* constellations of expressions, actions, objects, and people. In a sense, the scientist is *both* an actor (coordinating other people and various things, tools, technologies, and symbol systems) and a *patient* (being coordinated by other people and various things, tools, technologies, and symbol systems). Scientists become *agent-patients* “in sync with,” “linked with,” “in association with,” “in coordination with,” however we want to put it, other “actants” (adapting a term from Callon and Latour 1992), such as particular forms of language, other people, objects (e.g., scientific equipment, atoms, molecules, or birds), places (e.g., laboratories or fields), and non-verbal practices.

In the end, a Discourse is a “dance” that exists in the abstract as a coordinated pattern of words, deeds, values, beliefs, symbols, tools, objects, times, and places and in the here-and-now as a performance that is recognizable as just such a coordination. Like a dance, the performance here-and-now is never exactly the same. It all comes down, often, to what the “masters of the dance” (the people who inhabit the Discourse) will allow to be recognized or will be forced to recognize as a possible instantiation of the dance.

### 3.5 Discourses are not “units” with clear boundaries

The notion of Discourses will be important throughout this book. It is important, therefore, to make some points clear to avoid some common misunderstandings. Imagine I freeze a moment of thought, talk, action, or interaction for you, in the way that a projector can freeze a piece of film. To make sense of that moment, you



have to recognize the identities and activities involved in it. Perhaps, for this frozen moment you can't do so, so you move the film back and forward enough until you can make such a recognition judgment.

"Oh, now I see," you say, "It's a 'real Indian' razzing another 'real Indian'," or "It's a radical feminist berating a male for a crass patriarchal remark" or "It's a laboratory physicist orienting colleagues to a graph" or "It's a first-grader in Ms. X's class starting a sharing time story." Perhaps, if you now move the film backwards and forwards a bit more, you will change your judgments a little, a lot, or not at all.

Perhaps, you aren't sure. You and I even argue about the matter. You say that "It's a skinhead sending intimidating glances to a passing adult on the street" and I say, "No, it's just a wanna-be trying to act tough." You say, "It's a modern classroom teacher leading a discussion" and I say, "No, it's a traditional teacher giving a hidden lecture in the guise of a series of known-answer questions to the students."

This is what I call "recognition work." People engage in such work when they try to make visible to others (and to themselves, as well) who they are and what they are doing. People engage in such work when they try to recognize others for who they are and what they are doing. People engage in such work within interactions, moment by moment. They engage in such work when they reflect on their interactions later. They engage in such work, as well, when they try to understand human interaction as researchers, practitioners, theoreticians, or interventionists of various sorts.

Sometimes such recognition work is conscious, sometimes it is not. Sometimes people have labels they can articulate for the *whos* and *whats* they recognize, sometimes they don't. Sometimes they fight over the labels, sometimes they don't. And the labels change over time.

Thanks to the fact that we humans engage in recognition work, Discourses exist in the world. For example, there is a way of being a kindergarten student in Ms. X's class with its associated activities and ways with words, deeds, and things. Ms. X, her students, her classroom, with its objects and artifacts, and characteristic activities, are all *in* the Discourse she and her students create. These same people and things, of course, can be in other Discourses as well.

Recognition work and Discourses out in the world go hand-in-hand. Ms. X and her students engage in recognition work, for example when a certain sort of sharing time story isn't recognized as "acceptable" in this class and another type is. That recognition work creates a Discourse, that is, ways with words, actions, beliefs, emotions, values, interactions, people, objects, tools, and technologies that come to constitute "being and doing a student in Ms. X's class." In turn, this Discourse renders recognition work possible and meaningful. It's another "chicken and egg" question, then: which comes first, recognition work or Discourses? Neither. They are reflexively related, such that each creates the other.

Discourses have no discrete boundaries because people are always, in history, creating new Discourses, changing old ones, and contesting and pushing the bound-



aries of Discourses. You, an African-American male, speak and act here-and-now in an attempt to get recognized as a “new capitalist manager coaching a project team.” If you get recognized as such, then your performance is *in the Discourse* of new capitalist management. If you don’t, it isn’t.

If your performance has been influenced, intentionally or not, by another one of your Discourses (say, your membership in the Discourse of doing and being a jazz fan or your membership in a certain version of African-American culture as a Discourse), and it gets recognized in the new capitalist management Discourse, then you just, at least for here-and-now, “infected” one Discourse with another and widened what “counts” in the new capitalist management Discourse. You pushed the boundaries. In another time and place they may get narrowed.

You can get several of your Discourses recognized all at once. You (thinking of one of my esteemed colleagues at a university where I previously worked) “pull off” being here-and-now, in a class or meeting, for example, “a British, twice-migrant, globally oriented, traditional and modern, fashionable, female, Sikh, American professor of cultural studies and feminist postmodern anthropology” by weaving strands of your multiple Discourses together. If this sort of thing gets enacted and recognized enough, by enough people, then it will become not multiple strands of multiple Discourses interwoven, but a single Discourse whose hybridity may ultimately be forgotten. The point is *not* how we “count” Discourses; the point is the performance, negotiation, and recognition work that goes into creating, sustaining, and transforming them, and the role of language (always with other things) in this process.

Several other brief, but important points about Discourses are given in Box 3.1.

### **Box 3.1 Important points about Discourses**

- 1 Discourses can split into two or more Discourses. For example, medieval “natural philosophy” eventually split into philosophy and physics and other sciences.
- 2 Two or more Discourses can meld together. For example, after the movie *Colors* came out some years ago, mixed Latino, African-American, and white gangs emerged. Prior to that, Latinos, African-Americans, and whites had quite separate ways of being and doing gangs, as they still do in the case of segregated gangs.
- 3 It can be problematic whether a Discourse today is or is not the same as one in the past. For example, modern medicine bears little similarity to medicine before the nineteenth century, but, perhaps, enough to draw some important parallels for some purposes, though not for others.

- 4 New Discourses emerge and old ones die all the time. For example, in Palmdale, California (a desert community outside Los Angeles), and I assume other places, as well, an anti-racist skinhead Discourse is dying because people, including the police, tend to confuse its members with a quite separate, but similar looking, racist neo-Nazi skinhead Discourse.
- 5 Discourses are always defined in relationships of complicity and contestation with other Discourses, and so they change when other Discourses in a society emerge or die. For example, the emergence of a “new male” Discourse in the 1970s (ways of doing and being a “new male”) happened in response to various gender-based Discourses (e.g., various sorts of feminism) and class-based Discourses (the baby-boom middle class was too big for all young males to stay in it, so those who “made it” needed to mark their difference from those who did not), and, in turn, changed the meanings and actions of these other Discourses.
- 6 Discourses need, by no means, be “grand” or large scale. I used to eat regularly at a restaurant with a long bar. Among regulars, there were two different Discourses at opposite ends of the bar, that is, ways of being and doing that end of the bar. One involved young men and women and a lot of male-dominated sexual bantering; the other involved older people and lots of hard luck stories. The restaurant assigned different bartenders to each end (always a young female at the young end) and many of the bartenders could fully articulate the Discourse at their end of the bar and their role in it.
- 7 Discourses can be hybrids of other Discourses. For example, the school yards of many urban middle and high schools are places where teenagers of different ethnic groups come together and engage in what I (Gee 1996) have elsewhere called a “borderland Discourse” of doing and being urban teenager peers, when they cannot safely go into each other’s neighborhoods and when they each have their own neighborhood peer-based Discourses. The borderland Discourse is quite manifestly a mixture of the various neighborhood peer Discourses, with some emergent properties of its own.
- 8 There are limitless Discourses and no way to count them, both because new ones, even quite non-grand ones, can always emerge and because boundaries are always contestable.

One way to think about the role of Discourses is this. Imagine you have a giant map. Each Discourse is represented on the map like a country, but with movable boundaries that you can slide around a bit. You place the map on top of any language, action, or interaction you participate in or want to think about. You move the boundaries of the Discourse areas on the map around in negotiation with others or as your reflections change.

The map gives you a way to understand what you are seeing in relationship to the full set of Discourses in an institution (maybe it is just a map of all the Discourses in a given community, business, school, or university) or the society as a whole (if it's a map of the whole society), at least as far as you know it. Wherever on the map you line up the current thought, action, interaction, or language, it is immediately placed in relation to all the other countries (Discourses) on the map (though “fuzzily,” since you can move the boundaries around or others can try to make you do so).

Such a map is a Discourse grid against which you understand your own and others' thought, language, action, and interaction. It is an ever-changing map with which you can engage in recognition work. It is, as it exists across people and social groups, both the origin and the product of the reality of actual Discourses in the world, aligning and disaligning themselves with each other through history.

Understanding is always relative to the whole grid or map. The complex relationships among Discourses, which we can imagine as intricate criss-crossing lines connecting the various Discourse-areas on the map in complex positive and negative ways, define and demarcate individual Discourses. Your own Discourse grid is the limits of your understanding, and it is the fundamental job of education to give people bigger and better Discourse maps, ones that reflect the working of Discourses throughout society, the world, and history in relationship to each other and to the learner.

So Discourses are out in the world and history as coordinations (“a dance”) of people, places, times, actions, interactions, verbal and non-verbal expression, symbols, things, tools, and technologies that betoken certain identities and associated activities. Thus, they are material realities. But Discourses exist, also, as work to get people and things recognized in certain ways and not others, and they exist, as well, as maps that constitute our understandings. They are, then, social practices and mental entities, as well as material realities.

### **3.6 Discourses as “kits”**

If you are having trouble understanding the notion of “big D” Discourses, maybe this will help. Think for a minute of all the stuff you would put into the “Barbie doll” Discourse, restricting ourselves for the moment just to Barbie dolls and their accoutrements. How do you recognize something as in the “Barbie doll” world or Discourse, even if it hasn't got the Barbie logo on it? Girl and boy (e.g., Ken)

Barbie dolls look a certain way (e.g., their bodies have certain sorts of shapes and not others). They have characteristic sorts of clothes and accessories. They talk and act in certain ways in books, games, and television shows. They display certain sorts of values and attitudes. This configuration of words and things is the Barbie doll Discourse. You interpret everything Barbie within this frame. It is a sort of kit made of words, things, values, attitudes, and so forth from which one could build Barbie doll meanings. Even if you want to demean the Barbie doll Discourse by making a parody Barbie doll (such as Australia's "feral Cheryl") you have to recognize the Discourse in the first place.

Now imagine real people wanted to enact a Barbie Discourse. We know what they would have to look, act, interact, and talk like. We know what values and attitudes they would have to display. We know what sorts of objects, accessories, and places they would associate themselves with. They would draw these out of their now real-world Barbie kit. In fact, young people sometimes talk about someone, usually a girl, as being or trying to be a Barbie doll type of person.

The workings of society and history have given rise to innumerable kits with which we can live out our social lives as different and multiple kinds of people, different for different times and places – hopefully not as Barbie dolls, but as men, women, workers, students, gamers, lovers, bird watchers, environmentalists, radicals, conservatives, feminists, African-Americans, scientists, bar members (lawyers or drinkers) of different types, and so on and so forth through an endless and changing list.

### 3.7 Note

The term "Discourse" (with a big "D") is meant to cover important aspects of what others have called discourses (Foucault 1966, 1969, 1973, 1977, 1978, 1980, 1984, 1985); communities of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991); cultural communities (Clark 1996); discourse communities (Miller 1984; Berkenkotter and Huckin 1995); distributed knowledge or distributed systems (Lave 1988; Hutchins 1995); thought collectives (Fleck 1979); practices (Heidegger 1962; Bourdieu 1977, 1985, 1990a,b; Barton and Hamilton 1998); cultures (Geertz 1973, 1983); activity systems (Leont'ev 1981; Engestrom 1987, 1990; Wertsch 1998); actor-actant networks (Latour 1987; Callon and Latour 1992); and (one interpretation of) "forms of life" (Wittgenstein 1958).

Discourses, for me, crucially involve (a) situated identities; (b) ways of performing and recognizing characteristic identities and activities; (c) ways of coordinating and getting coordinated by other people, things, tools, technologies, symbol systems, places, and times; (d) characteristics ways of acting-interacting-feeling-emoting-valuing-gesturing-posturing-dressing-thinking-believing-knowing-speaking-listening (and, in some Discourses, reading-and-writing, as well).

A given Discourse can involve multiple identities. For example, a teacher, Ms

X, and her kindergarten students can take on different situated identities, different from each other and different within different activities, within the “Ms X-and-her-students’ classroom Discourse,” provided that Ms X has, in fact, created a coherent Discourse in and around her classroom. For instance, in one second-grade classroom I visited, one African-American boy was referred to as “at risk” (for school failure), “one of my good readers” (good enough to be in a high reading group, but not to be pulled out during reading time to go to the gifted program for reading, despite the fact that both groups were reading at the same grade level), “well behaved,” and “disaffiliated from the teacher.” These are all identities that the teacher’s classroom Discourse made available for this student. We can ask, of course, for each of these identities, and for other identities this child has within this classroom Discourse, which he is seeking to enact and which is being attributed to him based on behaviors that may, in fact, be bids for other identities.

Some people dislike the term “situated identity” and prefer, instead, something like “(social) position” or “subjectivity” (they tend to reserve the term “identity” for a sense of self that is relatively continuous and “fixed” over time). I use the term “identity” (or, to be specific, “socially situated identity”) for the multiple identities we take on in different practices and contexts and would use the term “core identity” for whatever continuous and relatively (but only relatively) “fixed” sense of self underlies our contextually shifting multiple identities.