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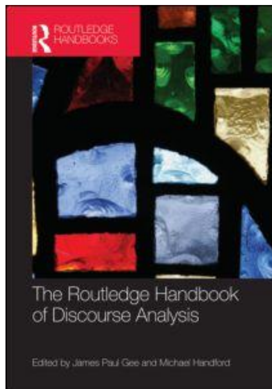

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Mediated discourse analysis

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5

Mediated discourse analysis

Suzie Wong Scollon and Ingrid de Saint-Georges

In December 1972 Ron and Suzie Scollon lived in Honolulu under the flight path of tankers flying to Guam to refuel B-52 bombers headed for Vietnam. From December 18th through the 29th, especially on Christmas Day, they noticed a great increase in the number of tankers. Ron reported this to friends who were active in protesting the war, but they did not believe his report, saying they had not read about it in the IF Stone weekly. This event marked an early stage in Ron's thinking about mediated discourse, as he observed that highly educated and well informed people would not believe what they could see with their own eyes and hear with their own ears had they chosen to do so. One, a professor of syntax, telephoned Senator Patsy Mink, who denied any knowledge of escalation. Not until they read about the operation in print did they believe it was happening. We now know that there was a secret "Operation Linebacker II," a massive bombing of Hanoi and Haiphong.

Mediated discourse analysis (MDA) is an approach to discourse analysis developed by Ron Scollon and colleagues around the turn of the millennium. As a theoretical position, it focuses on linkages between discourse and action and how these play out in complex social situations. It examines two broad kinds of questions that have been left under-theorized by other approaches. It investigates what part texts play in actions undertaken by social actors on the one hand and how texts arise as the outcomes of social interactive processes of production on the other hand. It will often start by asking (R. Scollon, 2001a, 2002):

- What is/are the action(s) going on here? What is someone doing here and why?
- What is the role of discourse in this/those actions? By whom is it produced, why is it used, and what motives are behind it?

By beginning with action rather than discourse or utterance meaning, MDA questions the idea that you can always "read" the meaning of a text from studying the text alone (Jones and Norris, 2005: 9). It prefers instead to pay attention to texts as they are used to mediate the real-time concrete actions of agents in actual social interactions and to examine their relevance to these actions. By doing this, MDA "seeks to develop a theoretical remedy for discourse analysis that operates without reference to social actions on the one hand, or social analysis that operates without reference to discourse on the other" (R. Scollon, 2001a: 1).

The core ideas of MDA were first articulated by Ron Scollon in the late 1990s (R. Scollon, 1997, 1998, 1999) on the basis of thinking and research dating back 50 years, when he read Nishida (1958), then used himself as an informant to study literacy, also using Spanish as a means to learning to play classical guitar and using guitar lessons as a means to learn Spanish. As a graduate

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student in linguistics in the early 1970s, he observed how people were so influenced by news media that printed accounts overrode what they could see and hear with their own eyes and ears. Back in December 1972, Scollon was trying to inform his fellow protestors that the war in Vietnam was escalating, with the intention perhaps of provoking joint action of some kind. He was dismayed that, because of the lack of media reportage, his friends did not believe what he told them, thus the first action of informing was derailed. The role of discourse was that, pending confirmation of the first action of informing, no further action could be taken. Scollon compared newspaper accounts of a bombing, showing how different details were selected to support varying ideologies.

Scollon's interest in narrative led to work in the ethnography of communication (Scollon and Scollon, 1979) and to new literacy studies (Scollon and Scollon, 1981). These were followed by work reported in *Nexus Analysis* (Scollon and Scollon, 2004) and in a study of media discourse (R. Scollon, 1998) and to a reworking of earlier work on first language acquisition (R. Scollon, 2001a), which theorized the nexus of practice. Thus MDA is in part a culmination of a theorization of research conducted from 1978 to 1983 in Alaska, reported in *Nexus Analysis*, and of research conducted from 1992 to 1997, largely in Hong Kong, theorized in *Mediated Discourse as Social Interaction* (R. Scollon, 1998).

Key studies

Scollon (1998) is usually credited for being the springboard from which scholars began doing what came to be known as mediated discourse analysis. It has led a number of them to engage in concrete, careful attempts at making visible for analysis the connections between discourse and action—a relatively daunting task, as actions are rather complex phenomena. They are complex at the time of their occurrence, and even more so if we take into account the historical circumstances that have led to them.

To disentangle these relations in the spirit of R. Scollon (2001a) in detailing the ontogenesis of language in a one-year-old child, some researchers have found it useful to pay attention to the ontogeny of social practices.[1] S. Scollon (2001), Shroyer (2004), and Castillo-Ayometzi (2007), for instance, have asked not only how social practices come about, but what happens when individuals can no longer operate according to the established norms and to practices embodied in their habitus[2] (Bourdieu 1977), and new practices need to replace the old ones (S. Scollon, 2001). Shroyer (2004) takes up the study of the practices through which children in America become "connected" with the American heritage in their early school years (daily pledge of allegiance, reading of text books, enacting of landmark events). This study raises the question of how children might develop the patriotic dispositions that might elicit strong commitment and loyalty to the nation in later years. Castillo-Ayometzi (2007) discusses adaptation and resilience in undocumented immigrants to the USA. Analyzing how, looking for a network of social support, they fall prey to the proselytizing practices of Baptist church missionaries, she documents how they are forced to embrace new narratives of the self, despite finding vivid contradictions between these and their own beliefs and experience. S. Scollon (2003) looks at the adjustments that take place among a group of friends practicing Taijiquan together in a Hong Kong park during the Taiwan Missile Crisis in March 1996, as different actors identify with different political stances. Exploring the links between social practice, habitus and ideology, these studies attempt to clarify how individuals "carry or are carried by political, social or cultural discourses" (S. Scollon, 2001) and to understand how broad macro-social–political discourses (e.g. religious or nationalist discourse) become part of our embodied life—one prime area of concern in MDA.

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Other attempts to render apparent the dialogic connection between discourse and action consider the role of embodied actions in anticipating or producing certain events, action or states. With regard to political discourse, again, there was interest in showing that broad policies and regulations do not come out of nowhere but really arise out of a series of embodied actions at the micro-interactional level, with the corollary that these policies and regulations can also be impacted by acting at this level (R. Scollon, 2008). While Al Zidjaly (2006) discusses the strategic uses of narratives and anticipatory discourses through which a quadriplegic man in Oman manages to have his caregivers act on his behalf and transform a law affecting him as a handicapped person, Dunne (2003) studies the making and shaping of Egyptian President Mubarak's speeches by multiple stakeholders and the particular meanings of "democracy" they impart. Both studies show that "politics" and regulations result from a host of local actions and practices, which then circulate on larger timescales to affect the lives of others. Al Zidjaly also advanced the efforts of others (S. Scollon, 2001; de Saint-Georges, 2003, 2012) to study the anticipatory stances individuals take toward their capacity to effect change in the future.

But focus on broad discourses and actions can also point to situations when discourses *fail* to be relevant to the actors targeted by them and on the consequences of the failure to integrate one group's practices and discourses with another's. Jones (1999, 2007), presenting the key findings of the first extended study in MDA, shows the all but unbridgeable gap between what public media say about AIDS/HIV and the actions and identities of social actors engaged in non-safe sex behavior or drug use. The official stance that "quality" people do not get AIDS/HIV creates "imaginary protections," encouraging people to disconnect their sexual behavior from possible infection. This gap makes public health discourses largely irrelevant in producing effective changes in behavior, with easily anticipated consequences. This study and others also show powerfully the nexus of social practices by which individuals build their social identities, impute identities to others or renegotiate the scripts associated with their social roles (R. Scollon, 1997, 1998, 2001a; Jones, 1999, 2007; S. Scollon, 2001; Wohlwend, 2009b); they also show how this nexus selects or leaves out bits of circulating discourses to piece together these identities (Norris, 2005), sometimes with dire consequences.

Transverse to many of the studies in MDA is thus a fundamental interest in human action not just as a theoretical issue, but as the "root of social change" (Johnston, 2004) as well as of individual transformation. Thus many MDA scholars have addressed social issues. They have focused on public health and AIDS/HIV prevention (Jones, 1999, 2007). They have examined the grounds on which officers of the immigration and naturalization services approve or deny granting a green card to non-US citizens (Johnston, 2004). They have discussed food, commerce and commodity discourses in the global age (de Saint-Georges and Norris, 2000; Scollon and Scollon, 2005; R. Scollon, 2005a), literacy, assessment and inclusiveness in the classroom (Wohlwend, 2009b), or processes of marginalization of minority cultures in real-time interactions as well as in urban landscapes (Lou, 2010a). They have considered the practices of "translating" a child from one continent and one world of practices to another, as in international adoptions cases (Raudaskoski, 2010). They have also explored issues linked to learning and the individual transformations that occur when going through new "semiotic apprenticeships" (Wells, 1999) or identity shifts. This has most clearly been shown perhaps in the work of Jocuns (2007, 2009) focusing on the learning of gamelan, a traditional Balinese form of music in which learning how to be an active participant in how gamelan is learned is part of becoming a gamelan player in its own right. Learning has been equally studied in Norris (2005) or Jones (2009), who look at the means through which individuals find, in their environments and technologies available around them, material for articulating new discourses about themselves—as when a woman needs to rethink her notion of

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family and agency as a recently divorced individual, or when skaters use video technology to perfect their acrobatic figures.

Although the projects mentioned above may vary greatly in the issues they take up or the aspects of MDA they stress, they have a number of characteristics in common. Firstly, they share a broad definition of discourse, including not only written and spoken texts, but also the broader social and historical "discourses" (Gee, 1996: 132) embodied in the built environment, in people's demeanor and beliefs, in objects and artifacts, and reflecting sets of beliefs, attitudes, representations and so on. Secondly, since the authors usually explore complex issues and networks of practices, they also tend to solicit and blend a variety of methodological tools, mobilizing the ones they deem most fit to address the issue under analysis. Lou (2010a, b) or Wohlwend (2009a, b) illustrate this in an exemplary way as they solicit multiple approaches for data gathering and data analysis (linguistic landscaping, multimodal analysis, discourse analysis, ethnographic observations, sociolinguistics interviews, etc.) by using some methodologies to strengthen the potential weaknesses of others—a process called, in MDA, "methodological interdiscursivity" (R. Scollon, 2000; de Saint-Georges and Norris, 2000). Finally, because complex issues usually extend in space and time, the research overviewed often looks beyond the here and now, considering how present discourse relates to past or future ones. They thus "enlarge the classical circumference of discourse analysis" (R. Scollon, 2001b; de Saint-Georges, 2005), a perspective that few other approaches to discourse have taken thus far.

Theoretical underpinnings

From a theoretical point of view, MDA is wide-ranging and deeply interdisciplinary in orientation, with roots in at least the following frameworks: interactional sociolinguistics, conversation analysis, anthropological linguistics or the ethnography of communication, critical discourse analysis, practice theory, mediated action and activity theory, social semiotics, multimodal discourse analysis, the new literacy studies and, more recently, cultural geography (Jensen, 2007). MDA does not hesitate to combine frameworks (even if some of them are not always considered compatible elsewhere), for the reasons we hinted at above: if social issues are complex, it does not seem viable to approach them by limiting oneself to one particular angle. The frameworks mentioned above are all important pillars of the MDA perspective because each of them illuminates in specific ways the study of social practices.

For example, MDA shares with critical discourse analysis (CDA) the goal of understanding societal issues and conflict, both contending that discourse analysis opens a window on social problems largely constituted in discourse, with power relations grounded in social practice. MDA sees discursive practices as *one form of social practice*, not the foundational or constitutive form of practice out of which the rest of society and the resulting power relations arise. MDA takes it that discourse is *among the means* by which society and culture are constituted. MDA also argues that society and culture are constituted in the material products of that society as well as in its non-discursive practices—e.g. handing (R. Scollon, 2001a), photography, skateboarding (Jones, 2009).

MDA also incorporates the frameworks of the new literacy studies (NLS; Scollon and Scollon, 1981; Street, 1984; Gee, 1996; Barton and Hamilton, 1998). Much prior research reified literacy as an ontological object independent of human action; one "had" or "did not have" literacy. NLS scholars on the contrary have shown literacy to be itself a form of practice, giving off information about individuals' identities and affiliations. For example, in Singapore citizens are schooled in literacy in English and Chinese, Malay or Tamil, each with a different writing system, depending on family origins. Researchers have discussed how different literacies have different currency on the "literacy market" of a community and thus are sensitive to the power relations dominant in

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the community. MDA seeks to extend this conceptualization to all other mediational means. It is not just literacy that is constituted within practices, but all mediators of actions. Mediational means always index certain identities and express belonging and membership (as in the amateur use of the chisel by the occasional woodcarver or its expert manipulation by the professional cabinetmaker).

From anthropological linguistics and intercultural communication analysis, MDA takes the concern to explicate the sociocultural production of group identities, boundaries, and the discursive process of "othering." From interactional sociolinguistics and ethnomethodology, MDA takes its focus on real-time actions and on the "practical" inference that individuals need to make as they construct and interpret meanings. From "cultural geography" and multimodal semiotics, it borrows an interest in place and in the way we interpret the meaning of public texts as they are materially placed in the world (Scollon and Scollon, 2003). For MDA, many useful theoretical tools and concepts have been provided by other traditions, and they can usefully be brought together to illuminate the study of human actions.

Unit of analysis

While firmly anchored in the various frameworks briefly highlighted above, MDA has also developed a toolkit to focus attention on its own issues. We thus spell out key notions and ontological entities mobilized by researchers working within that frame. In general, social theory takes social groups or social classes as the primary focus of analysis. They are considered the "social units" that constitute the world and society, and individual humans who make up social groups are largely taken as interchangeable. Central questions typically have to do with how struggles between classes or groups form a dialectic so as to produce ideology, which is then absorbed by or embodied by individual members, giving groups a relatively permanent or stable existence. Social institutions, then, are primarily ontological entities where these struggles take place; individual humans become interesting only as they come to represent social institutions (Wertsch, 1991).

In contrast to this "social theory ontology" is an "individual ontology"—often called cognitive—that sees everything as being built up out of the actions or values or will of individuals. Struggles or conflicts, or even successful interactions, are primarily thought of as individual or interindividual, though some individuals "borrow" on the power of aggregates of people who have a common goal or interest. For example, a union as an aggregate of individuals may strike in order to obtain higher wages. Within that ontology, cognitive psychology is the primary discipline from which everything else derives.

Instead, in MDA researchers take the primary entity to be the *social action*, taken by a social actor through the use of some *mediational means* (Wertsch, 1991). These are all the physical and symbolic "objects," carriers of history and culture, that mediate people's actions and interactions, from technical tools and objects such as drills, bottle openers, pen and papers to the representational tools of language, diagrams, mnemonic techniques, pitch and intonation or genres. Mediational means have both inherent affordances and constraints: they enable certain actions better than others, and, to be useful, their usage needs to have been internalized at some point in the life cycle of the individual. As R. Scollon (2005b: 20) notes, focusing on the mediated action as the unit of analysis is a way of positioning the focus at a point that is not the individual social actor, nor the social groups or institutions, nor the mediational means, but a point at which these are brought concretely into engagement.

In MDA researchers further distinguish between social action and *social practice*. The former stresses the fact that each action is always unique and irreversible. This action at 5.30 pm is different

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from that action at 5.31 pm. Observation of everyday life makes it obvious that there are also kinds of actions that recur more or less frequently in the lifetime of an individual. These recurring actions, usually learned by participating in the everyday social life of a specific community, are called "practice" in MDA. Bourdieu (1977) defines a practice as an action with a history. R. Scollon defines a practice as "a historical accumulation within the habitus/historical body of the social actor of mediated actions taken over his or her life (experience) and which are recognizable to other social actors as 'the same' social action" (2001b: 149). Unlike its use in sociology and social theory, practice in MDA is understood in a rather narrow sense. MDA focuses not on "nationalism" as a practice, but on the myriad local actions that come to constitute, over time, a nationalist attitude in a particular individual located in a specific community. For example, putting the right hand over the heart, standing and saying the pledge of allegiance every morning in the classroom will be recognized by Americans as such a practice. It might coexist with cooking turkey in a certain way every November, or with wearing small flags and ribbons on one's jacket's lapel and the like.

The material entities constitutive of a mediated action

Some might argue that starting from such concrete units as the fleeting social action or the repeatable social practice is too narrow a focus to address the important social issues of our time (Jones and Norris, 2005; R. Scollon, 2008: 11). The stance taken by MDA, however, is that the broad social discourses of contemporary life circulate through all moments of human action, so in that sense looking at practice might be more meaningful than might seem at first glance. These broader social discourses may be most visible when one starts to unpack three essential material entities constitutive of any mediated action (see Figure 5.1):

1) the historical body of the social actor(s) engaged in the mediated action
2) the interaction order (the configuration of people present and the social structuring of their relationships)
3) the discourses in place (the complex set of discourses at the intersection of which the social action is carried out).

The *historical body* (Nishida, 1958), or what others, following Mauss (1936) and Bourdieu (1977), refer to as "habitus," could be defined as the abstraction of the aggregation of social practices or repeated experiences of the social actor in the course of life. It corresponds to the accumulation of

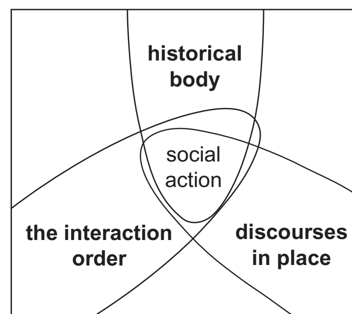

Figure 5.1 The material entities constitutive of a mediated action (reproduced from Scollon and Scollon, 2003).

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experience that makes people perform actions with greater or lesser facility or dexterity. A lifetime of personal habits feel so natural that one's body carries out actions seemingly without being told. For example, a person might automatically squish ants on her desk. Another might get a spider or a ladybug to crawl onto a piece of paper and then shake it out a window. These actions reveal to spectators a lifetime of habits. Though the same person might do one for decades and then change to the other, the actions are linked by belonging to specific networks, and ultimately they are forms of embodied ideology.

The notion of *interaction order* comes from sociologist Erving Goffman (1971). It refers to the social configuration in which actors find themselves: the individuals who are present, the attention they pay to each other, the ecology of the situation. The concern is to identify in what kind of interactional configuration an action is carried out or inscribes itself. As R. Scollon (2008: 19) emphasizes, reading a statement criticizing some new regulation constitutes a very different kind of action (and thus carries very different meanings) depending on whether someone is reading this statement alone at his desk, in front of a television camera, or out loud among a group of activist friends sharing the same outlook on the regulation. The impact of the reading will be very different depending on the participants' roles in the situation: whether one is a ratified participant in a talk-show or voices his opinion as a non-invited guest will likely make a big difference in the reception and interpretation of this discourse. As R. Scollon remarks, the meaning of the text being read might at first have a potential for interpretation that we assume would not vary greatly from one situation to another, but the actual act of reading might transform that meaning given the interactional configuration in which it is accomplished (2008: 19).

The third material entity requiring attention is the arrays of texts actually present in the situation, as well as the mediational means available at the point of taking action: which texts or tools are being attended to? Which ones are being ignored or sidelined? The role of the analyst is to identify which discourses are present and used at the moment of performing a social action. Studying the discourses in place in a classroom for example might include attention to the posters on the walls, the spatial organization of desks and the perspective on instruction they materialize, the words written on the board, presidential portraits or religious crucifix, the textbooks, the "play corner," the architecture of the school, its location in a wealthy or poor urban suburb and the way the sun shining through the windows changes the atmosphere and level of concentration. Besides studying these components, the researcher will need to listen to the overt discourses circulating in that space: the private chat pupils have hiding from the teacher's attention, the group discussions in collaborative moments of learning, the way the teacher words his explanations and instructions, the essays written by the pupils or the poems recited by them. She will also need to pay attention to the discourses "submerged" in the historical bodies of participants. A mediated discourse analysis does not seek to make an inventory of the discourses aggregating in one place, but rather to identify which ones constrain the actions of interest to the researcher and which ones seem, on the contrary, to facilitate their accomplishment or give them impetus.

Attending to these three interrelated aspects of any mediated action is a way to avoid uprooting words and actions from the historical bodies of the individuals performing them, or disconnecting the discourses and actions from the sociocultural context of their formation and realization, or ignoring the history of these actions and discourses for the individual and in the situation. These three entities—historical bodies, interaction order, discourses in place—are indeed not static entities but "processes in motion over time" (Wortham, 2006). The individual accumulates experience in the course of his/her trajectory across time and space, social orders open up and close and are rearranged, discourses in place are transformed as buildings are refashioned, innovative technologies are introduced, new texts and discourses circulate. The trajectory of these

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changes is unpredictable. Successfully developing a mediated discourse analysis means trying to map when these somewhat autonomous trajectories intersect and meet.

Given this complexity, one last issue that needs to be addressed concerns how researchers can be in a position to identify and analyze the actions most likely to give them a grip on the issue they are investigating. That question is taken up in the next section, as we report in a brief example what an MDA research project might look like.

Doing a mediated discourse analysis: nexus analysis

The historical, ethnographic and methodological arm of MDA is called "nexus analysis." A nexus analysis consists in opening up the circumference of analysis around moments of human action to begin to see the lines, sometimes visible and sometimes obscured, of historical and social processes by which discourses come together at particular moments of human action, as well as to make visible the ways in which outcomes such as transformations in those discourses, social actors and mediational means emanate from those moments of action.

Nexus analyses can take many forms (compare for example Jones, 2007, Wohlwend, 2009a, b, Raudaskoski, 2010, and Lou, 2010a, b). The research may involve close analysis of texts (or not), semiotic analyses of visuals, study of the interaction order, ethnographic observations and the like—or any combinations of these. This variety proceeds from nexus analysis as a form of action research, intimately bound to the specifics of situation studied and issue researched. The researcher in MDA is considered an integral part of the nexus she studies. She uses scientific inquiry to engage with the nexus—sometimes even to transform it.

A nexus analysis usually centers on three main tasks or activities: (1) engaging the nexus of practice; (2) navigating the nexus of practice; (3) changing the nexus of practice.[3] The following report on a project carried out by one of the authors (together with Yuling Pan; see S. Scollon, 2005) on census enumeration illustrates very briefly what is involved.

The opening task, "engaging the nexus of practice," consists in establishing a "zone of identification" with the nexus—that is, the researcher must place herself as part of the nexus of practice under study. When and how to identify oneself as part of the nexus is thus an important part of "engaging the nexus." We examine how this step is taken in the "census enumeration project."

A census consists of a series of closely related activities through which information about the members of a given population is acquired and recorded for statistical purposes for research, marketing or planning. Pan and Scollon sought to understand the moment of enumeration involving Chinese immigrants to the United States, uncovering sociopolitical discourses embodied in census forms and census enumerators, as well as immigrants. In particular, they wanted to find out why certain recent immigrants were reluctant to engage in the process. A preliminary step was to enter the nexus of practice. The focus was on determining the kind of interactional configurations in which enumeration happens (interaction order), the history of experience individuals had with census enumeration (historical body), and the aggregates of discourses coming into play at the moment when individuals engaged with a governmental discourse such as census enumeration ("discourses in place"). At this early stage, the authors identified the door-to-door interviews carried out by census enumerators as key moments of the process. They decided to observe the small "withs" (Goffman, 1971) or configurations of actors in which the process takes place, the history of practice of Chinese immigrants with the forms, and the discourses in place in homes where census enumeration typically occurs. It was relatively simple for the researchers, sponsored as they were by the US Census Bureau, to identify themselves as participants in interviews of Chinese immigrants and thus to start establishing

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themselves in a zone of identification with the residents of Washington DC urban neighborhoods. This position not only provided a good look-out post from where to study the practices of census enumeration, but also allowed them to engage in this practice themselves.

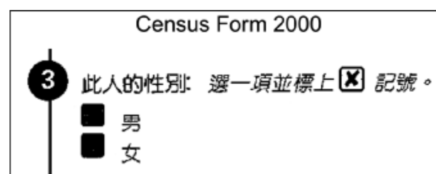
The second stage and main phase of a nexus analysis, "navigating the nexus of practice," consists, beyond identifying key sites and action, in working your way through the "trajectories of participants, places and situations both back in time historically and forward through actions and anticipations to see if crucial discourse cycles or semiotic cycles can be identified" (R. Scollon, 2008).

To understand why some people might be reluctant to engage in door-to-door interviews, researchers needed to go beyond local actions to open up the circumference of analysis. This is akin to providing what literary critics term the "backstory"—a narrative of what has happened in the character's life before the current narrative begins. In the census study the researchers set out to study how the habits of residents related to forms, languages, gadgets such as clipboards, as part of the discourses circulating at the moment of filling out the form. They attended to the interactional configuration in which enumeration takes place. They also paid attention to the historical bodies of individuals, their different ethnicity or their gender and occupational roles.

Looking at door-to-door interviews, the researchers identified a number of potential obstacles. Even before such an action can take place, the enumerator must gain access to a respondent by ringing a doorbell. No questioning can take place if a resident does not recognize the enumerator and open the door. The enumerator must present an adequate "personal front" (Goffman, 1971). She must take care to look professional and somewhat official, but unlike a solicitor. But, to understand this simple action, we also need to understand the habits of residents. In many big cities it may not be considered safe to open the door to strangers, and, in the experience of many residents, this may simply never have been done.

Navigating the nexus of practice also entailed interviewing a social worker with ten years of experience in working with Chinatown immigrants and in helping them deal with the census. Participants also taught English to recent immigrants, interviewing them in the process. The social worker highlighted that in Chinatown the census workers were typically African American males who had difficulty gaining entry into homes where Chinese immigrant women were home alone. The researchers also found out that recent immigrants from China are accustomed to having forms being filled out by census takers and thus have limited experience with deciphering questions or filling out forms, answering multiple choice questions or interacting with strangers or representatives of the government. This historical memory, as well the inability to speak or read English or Census form Chinese (that is, to speak Mandarin and to read simplified rather than complex characters), made them reluctant to engage in census enumeration (see Figure 5.2).

Navigating the nexus of practice thus resulted in studying discourse on three different levels. Firstly, it consisted in studying discourse as the complex aggregates of discourses in place, including the discourse on the census forms, the ways of dressing of census enumerators, their technological front (with personal digital assistants, notebook computers and the like), the design of the form,


Census Form 2000

3 此人的性別: 選一項並標上 [X] 記號。

男

女

Figure 5.2 The census form in 2000

Census Form 2010

3. 这个人的性别是什么？请在一个框中标记 ☒。

☐ 男 ☐ 女

Figure 5.3 The census form in 2010

the characters chosen and so on. Secondly, it included studying discourse as, and in, the bodies of individual social actors and how they embodied consciously or unconsciously a history of socio-cultural processes (opening doors to stranger, filling a form oneself or having it filled by someone else and so on). Thirdly, navigating the nexus consisted in analyzing discourse as distributed in the bodies of other social actors (the exchanges between census enumerator and residents, between social workers and residents, identity displays and so on). This analysis allowed the unpacking of various aspects of census enumeration as a situated and mediated process.

The third stage in a nexus analysis is called *changing the nexus of practice* and consists in re-engaging the product of the analysis back into the nexus of practice where it originates. The researcher has now contributed "time and skills in analysis to open up and make visible links and connections among the many trajectories of the historical bodies, discourses in place, and interaction order," which constitutes the issue under investigation (Scollon and Scollon, 2004: 178), and the work of analyzing and disentangling practices and discourses has now become an integral part of the nexus. In the census project, changing the nexus of practice consisted in recommending changes at various levels on the basis of the results of the analysis. These included changes in the discourses in place, such as the Chinese characters printed on census forms (see Figure. 5.3), the place of enumeration and the interactional configuration. Many Chinatown residents were now being enumerated by a trusted social worker at a nearby social service center rather than by strangers at their home. Doing discourse analysis was thus transformative of the nexus of practice.

It may not be evident to the reader how this simple change in the way the US Census Bureau goes about its work constitutes activist sociolinguistics. It is conceivable that, taken together with Johnston's work with the immigration and naturalization services, Castillo-Ayometzi's work with narratives of undocumented immigrants crossing the Rio Grande into Texas, Shroyer's work on patriotism and recent moves by the State of Arizona to allow detention of citizens or documented immigrants without cause, changes in enumeration may be less than trivial. When door-to-door enumeration becomes a form of gatekeeping encounter in which the census taker has power to define significant outcomes for respondents who must account for themselves, it might be important that the respondents keep some agency in the process.

Conclusion

We see discourse analysis as a fundamentally active force. As Ron Scollon concludes in his book *Analyzing public discourse*, "in democratic public discourse positions are stated, positions are argued, positions are negotiated and the actions which are taken and which become policy and practice are the outcome of this dialectic" (2008: 162). Linguists have a role to play in society because they are adept at using and interpreting language, and language is the means of setting, consolidating or undermining sociopolitical positions. Being part of the process and part of the dialectic, they too can aspire to affect processes in the social world. But this cannot be done without seeing one's own trajectory altered in the process, and they must keep their wits about them to pay attention to the roar of tankers or clouds of petroleum when others are ignoring them.

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Further reading

Scollon, R. (1998) *Mediated Discourse as Social Interaction*. London: Longman.

This book is the springboard from which scholars began doing what became known as MDA. In that work Scollon argues that, in the production of texts of mediated discourse, the texts, objects or images are secondary to social interactions among the producers of the texts.

Scollon, R. (2001a) *Mediated Discourse: The Nexus of Practice*. London: Routledge.

This further developed the above-mentioned conceptual core and detailed the ontogeny of the practice of handing an object in a child in the second year of life. The phrase "mediated discourse analysis" is first found here.

Scollon, R. and Scollon, S. B. K. (2004) *Nexus Analysis: Discourse and the Emerging Internet*. London: Routledge.

This outlined the method of nexus analysis retrospectively, by using data from projects conducted in Alaska from 1979 through to 1984. This is the methodological arm of MDA.

Norris, S. and Jones, R. H. (2005) *Discourse in Action: Introducing Mediated Discourse Analysis*. London: Routledge.

This edition of chapters introduces MDA and addresses real contemporary social issues, explicating key notions by showing actions taken with texts and their consequences.

Scollon, R. (2008) *Analyzing Public Discourse: Discourse Analysis in the Making of Public Policy*. London and New York: Routledge.

The book returns to Alaska, the site of the first nexus analysis, showing how MDA can be used to bring about change in the selling of oil leases off the Arctic coast to major oil companies, detailing how the analysis itself can be submitted as public input that the government bureau is obliged to pay attention to. It is an example of "activist sociolinguistics."

Notes

1 We discuss in the section "Unit of Analysis" below the distinction MDA makes between social actions and social practices.
2 Bourdieu's notion of habitus is further discussed below, under the heading "Unit of Analysis." It refers to the dispositions et predispositions an actor has by virtue of his previous conditions and experience and which are generative of specific ways of acting, perceiving or behaving in the world.
3 These activities are described in more detail in Scollon and Scollon (2004).

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