

# Using Discourse Analysis to Fuel Brand Strategies

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Stuart Hall (1997) makes the point that discourse is “*not purely a ‘linguistic’ concept*”, suggesting that it combines both language and practice, that it overrides the traditional demarcation between what we say (language) and what we do (practice). This paper sets out the main principles of Discourse Analysis, shows how Discourse Analysis can unlock a deeper understanding of human society, and illustrate how Discourse Analysis could be used to fuel brand strategies, allowing brand managers, marketers, and market researchers to move beyond a simple intuitive knowledge of ‘what words do’ to a more systematic and powerful utilisation of discourse.

Although we often use terms like *saying, conversation, or speaking* in the context of discourse, it is important to note that the term *discourse* is very broad, encompassing media, art, news, fashion, advertising and much more. Therefore, words like conversation or speaking, when used in the context of Discourse Analysis are often just being used as shorthand for discourse, to make the text flow more naturally and to provide some variation for the reader.

For reasons of time and focus this paper cannot be a full introduction to Discourse Analysis, just as it cannot fully review the potential that Discourse Analysis presents for the creation and management of brands and services, and it will therefore concentrate on those features that are common to most Discourse Analysis approaches (usually referred to as traditions), followed by a deeper review of three particularly relevant traditions, and will finish with an overview of key lines of enquiry and exploration for the commercial utilisation of Discourse Analysis to fuel brand strategies.

*[Note, in order to make the paper clearer, the ‘proper’ names of approaches such as Conversation Analysis, and the word Discourse Analysis, have been treated as proper nouns, i.e. they are shown as starting with capital letters. This has been done to draw attention to the use of words as indicators of specific approaches and would not normally be done when using these words in everyday writing.]*

## Actors and Locations

Within modern society there are many types of discourse that relate to brands and services and with the growth of social media these are becoming more various, more impactful, and more widely accessible. Discourses vary in terms of where they take place, in terms of content, in terms of purpose, and in terms of actors (i.e. who is talking to whom).

In thinking about Discourse Analysis the context of brands and services the key combinations of actors can be thought of as:

- Organisations interacting with their customers (and potential customers).
- Customers interacting with customers, for example word of mouth.
- People within the organisation connecting with other people in the same organisation.
- People outside the organisation and its customers engaging in discourse, with all of the various actors mentioned above, or generally.

In the context of brands and services the phenomena of interest include all types of discourse, including print, films, traditional people-to-people conversations, broadcasting, and beyond that to anything that is used to communicate such as clothing, gifts, cards, tattoos, other social artefacts, and of course, brand logos.

The locations for brand and service discourses are many and diverse, but the ones that are most accessible to organisations include:

- Face-to-face; for example in-store interactions, staff briefings, meetings with outsiders such as press, shareholders, and regulators.
- Telephone; including marketing, customer support, and discussions with suppliers.
- Letters and emails; including customer orders, feedback, and brand marketing.
- Market research; including survey responses and the outputs from qualitative research, such as focus groups.
- Traditional media; including the press, radio, television, movies etc.
- Official reports; including company reports, government reports, and court reports.

However this list is partial and there are many other locations for discourses, including graffiti, tattoos, fashion, signage and many others. But perhaps the most important agent for change, driving the increase in attention to discourse, is social media. In the past, most discourse was either one way (such as brand advertising), or it was dispersed and ephemeral. Conversations between workers on the shop floor, between parents at the school gate, or between friends at the pub were all important but they left very little observable, researchable trace. Social media has made many more discourses accessible; it has made them easier to share, and in many cases rendered them more impactful.

This paper will show how Discourse Analysis can inform, help, and guide brands and services in the context of all of the actors and locations mentioned above. However, it is likely that the largest impact of Discourse Analysis will be in the context of social media, because of the volume of content, the accessibility of content, and the growing insistence of customers, citizens, and stakeholders that they must be listened to.

## What is Discourse Analysis?

Life would be simpler if there were a clear and agreed definition of Discourse Analysis, but the discipline is relatively new, with most of its progress being made since 1980, and its usages and positions are widely contested by people (usually academics at this stage) proposing different alternatives. It is best to think of Discourse Analysis, at this stage in its development, as a family of approaches, often called *traditions*. Some of the key traditions will be outlined later in the paper and three of them will be examined in more depth. At this stage in the paper it is helpful to note that there are four themes that most Discourse Analysis approaches share in common and which help identify what is and what is not Discourse Analysis, these are:

- That discourse is constitutive.
- That discourse is situated and contextual.
- That discourse is dialogical and contested.

- That the study of discourse is a proper subject of study, not just a proxy for some underlying phenomenon.

Traditional, structural models of language saw it as a neutral reporter of things, as being “transparent or reflective” (Taylor, 2001). However, Discourse Analysis recognises language as being constitutive, i.e. it does things, and indeed it creates things. For example an order, a joke, and a warning are not descriptions or references; they create the action that follows. Beyond these simple examples language creates ideas, positions, memory, behaviours, and rituals. In this way the Discourse Analysis view of what we say is very different from the structuralist view of people like Ferdinand de Saussure who saw language as being essentially referential, allowing people to talk about things.

Discourse is contextual; the words that are uttered depend on the context for their meaning and outcomes. For example, if my aunt were to describe a film as “*wicked*” and my son were to describe a film as “*wicked*” it is likely that they would be describing something different and that they would also be attempting to create different outcomes. The issue of discourses being situated and contextual is another major difference from the structuralist point of view, which saw the rules of usage as belonging to the language or the dialect, not to the social.

One potential weakness with much of the current Discourse Analysis material that has been published is that most of it has been focused on Western English-speaking countries. Some of the available texts make pronouncements about common patterns with discourse, but these may only apply to Western English-speaking countries, which means that brand and services would need to explore other contexts more carefully.

The term *dialogical* is often associated with the Russian philosopher and semiotician Mikhail Bakhtin, who asserted that everything that is said is uttered in response to things that have previously been said, not just in conversations, but in the broadest possible sense of discourse, society and cultural. This was paraphrased by the playwright Dennis Potter when he said “*The trouble with words is that you never know whose mouths they have been in.*” This view places language and discourse firmly within society, and implies that people are constrained in terms of what can be said and at the same time play a role in the development of how discourses develop. Even when we just talk to ourselves in our head, even when we write in our diary, we are responding to things that others have said, we are using words that others have said, and we are using meanings that have been passed to us.

The notion of language being contested is one that recognises that discourses are not changed by the whim of the speaker. Listeners have to respond to discourses for the change to happen, phrases have to be repeated for them to become embedded, and meanings need to have a degree of consistency for the discourse to persist. Different traditions pay varying degrees of attention to the process of discourse being contested, and to how this process interacts with power structures within society, but they would all tend to recognise the process of language being contested.

Perhaps the most unifying feature of the different Discourse Analysis traditions is that they all envisage discourse, the process of people communicating with each other, as a proper subject for study. By contrast, psychologists have tended to use what people say as a clue to some underlying process, linguists have tended to study the structure of language and/or the process of translation,

and anthropologists and historians have used discourse as evidence of actions, rituals, and beliefs. Discourse Analysts see talk as action, they study what people 'do' when they talk, for example how they know whose turn it is to speak next, how to react to what others say, and how people know what is and isn't sayable.

### **The Phenomena of Discourse Analysis**

A further indication of what Discourse Analysis is can be gained by considering some frequently employed analytical tools associated with Discourse Analysis, for example turn-taking, footing, and language games. Whilst tools and approaches are often associated with a specific Discourse Analysis tradition it is not unusual for the same tools to be employed by some or even all of the other traditions.

*Turn-taking* is most closely associated with Conversation Analysis and refers to the way that people tend to know, in very fine detail, how they are supposed to take turns in a conversation, particularly in one-to-one conversations. The clues for turn-taking include short pauses, often just 0.4 seconds long, and a knowledge that lists often consist of three items (at least they do in English speaking countries). The power of turn-taking is most evident when it does not work so well, for example if people are combining a face-to-face meeting with others dialling in, or in online conversations, where non sequiturs and out of sequence comments abound.

*Footing* is a term used to describe the implied relationship between actors and the subject of a discussion. Discourse Analysis is often particularly interested in the devices used to achieve a change of footing. Goffman (1981) uses an example of dialogue captured and reported from a press briefing with US President Richard Nixon. At one stage during the press briefing Nixon started teasing one of reporters, who was female, about the fact she was wearing trousers rather than a dress. Goffman highlights how Nixon shifted the footing of the session from the 'serious' business of the briefing to the winding up of the session and shifted the immediate communication from a formal, one-to-many communication to a one-to-one observed communication.

In the world of brands and services, brands often choose a very specific footing, such as the technologist speaking to the less informed style of German car manufacturer Audi with its "*Vorsprung durch Technik*" tag line. Changes of footing are also a well-recognised part of the sales process (albeit a craft knowledge rather than one based on theory). For example, if a salesman is told by a potential customer that "*I am not sure that I'd really use this new product*", he might say something like '*That's really interesting, I know just how you feel. But, I was talking to one of my customers Joe the other day and he said when he bought it he felt that he might not get the real value out of it, but now he has had it for a year he has found that he is really getting the benefit.*' This sales manoeuvre utilises a change of footing device that sales theory calls "*feel, felt, found*".

The idea of *language games* was initially developed by Wittgenstein (1953), who highlighted that we often communicate with set patterns, including patterns of actions. For example, Wittgenstein describes a simple language game between a builder and his mate, the only words in the language game are the names of types of stones, such as 'block', 'pillar', and 'slab'. The builder shouts one of these words and his mate fetches and passes him the right object. There are no other words, for example terms such as 'from', 'please', and 'fetch' are all omitted, but between this builder and his mate the game functions. Similar situations abound in the world of brands and services, with people asking to supersize their burger meal, for fully-comprehensive insurance, or going for a swift half at

the pub after work (where the consequential action may be understood as not being swift or limited to a half-pint). Part of Wittgenstein's point was that language is much more than referential, the builder's language was constitutive in the very real sense that a wall resulted from the words.

John Austin expanded Wittgenstein's language games into the field of everyday conversations with his focus on *speech acts*, which include such everyday patterns as greeting, ordering, warning, congratulating, and promising. Putting the language games and speech acts together it is possible to see the Discourse Analysis view of interactions as being based on the utilisation of packages of pre-existing speech, rather than thinking of people as crafting conversations from isolated nouns, verbs, and adjectives.

### **The Traditions of Discourse Analysis**

As mentioned earlier, the different strands of Discourse Analysis tend to be known as traditions, and they tend to differ in focus, in epistemology, and in their perceived role of the researcher. No two practitioners in Discourse Analysis would come up with the same taxonomy for the discipline and many researchers when tackling a problem would draw on more than one tradition, but the following list provides an overview of Discourse Analysis from a commercial, brands and services point of view.

The key traditions of Discourse Analysis currently include:

- Conversation Analysis.
- Discursive Psychology.
- Foucauldian.
- Bakhtinian.
- Sociolinguistics (inc. corpus research).
- 'Critical' – (including Critical Discursive Psychology and Critical Discourse Analysis).

The first three of these traditions are going to be covered more fully later in the paper. However, this section of the paper provides a brief overview of each of the traditions listed above.

Conversation Analysis focuses very closely on specific conversations, seeking to understand what people do when they talk to each other. It utilises detailed transcripts that record pauses, repairs, and stumbles; it inspects turn-taking, footing, and other devices such as *adjacency pairs* to identify specific patterns which occur in the conversation. Compared with most other forms of Discourse Analysis, Conversation Analysis tends to assume that the observer has a relatively small impact on the analysis and that the findings are 'evidenced' by the data (i.e. it sees itself more positivist and less constructionist).

Discursive Psychology moves the focus from individual conversations to a slightly wider focus. Discursive Psychology rejects the traditional model adopted by most cognitive psychologists, who tend to use the words we say as clues to hidden, unseen processes. Discursive Psychology treats what happens during discourse as the topic of its investigation, partly because they believe it is impossible to impute underlying meanings and partly because they believe the locus of many of the phenomena of psychology exist in discourse, i.e. they are shared, rather than existing within the individual's mind.

Michel Foucault contribution to Discourse Analysis took the focus of investigation away from individual conversations and away from individuals and looked at discourse at the social and historical level. Foucault takes a distinctly post-structuralist approach to discourse, arguing that all meaning is created by discourse, that without discourse a thing does not have meaning, and that a regime of truth exists at any period in time and that the regime defines what can and what cannot be said.

Mikhail Bakhtin developed his ideas in Russia and despite having been active in the field since the 1920s his ideas did not reach a wide audience until the 1960s. Like Foucault, Bakhtin takes a 'big picture' view of discourse, looking at how patterns (which he terms *genres*) determine what can and can't be said in a particular context. As mentioned earlier in the paper Bakhtin coined the phrase *dialogical* to emphasise that everything that is said (i.e. any new part of the discourse) is said in response to what has been said before.

Sociolinguistics is a branch of Discourse Analysis that can include quantitative, positivist, and computerised approaches, for example Yates' (2001) investigation of internet interactions. Sociolinguistics is the study of how society impacts the use of language and the effects of language on society – which means that some people using Sociolinguistics may be engaged in projects that would fall outside of a strict definition of Discourse Analysis, and would be closer to some aspects of ethnography, linguistic anthropology, and ethnomethodology.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Critical Discursive Psychology (CDP) are both examples of an approach to social research, sometimes known as *action* research or *critical* research, where a project is undertaken with a specific agenda, usually an emancipatory one. Examples of action research include projects undertaken with a feminist, anti-racist, or anti-homophobic rationale and perspective. Some researchers criticise action research as being too open to the views of the researcher causing them to misinterpret the evidence. However, the methods and some of the thinking that surround the issue of CDA and CDP might be relevant to the commercial world, where brands and services are looking to maximise the ROI for their shareholders, or more prosaically the benefits for customers.

### **Pragmatic extensions to Discourse Analysis**

One of the hot topics in marketing, market research, and brand management at the moment is social media research, the process of learning about brands, services, and customers by listening to the discourse of the blogosphere. Although social media research (also known as blog mining, buzz monitoring, netnography, and blogography) may not be part of the formal definition of Discourse Analysis, it would seem odd to leave them out of a paper which was looking at the commercial implications of analysing the discourses of brands and services just because they did not necessarily conform to the expectations of the term Discourse Analysis. Therefore this paper will examine social media research and social media monitoring as pragmatic extensions to Discourse Analysis in the context of brands and services.

### **Conversation Analysis**

In many ways Conversation Analysis is one of the most accessible forms of Discourse Analysis, with its focus on understanding what people do when they engage in talk. The field was created by

Harvey Sacks in the 1960s and early 1970s. Prior to Sacks most people had felt that individual conversations were too disorganised and haphazard to be worthy of investigation, but Sacks showed that individual conversations could be studied, if they were studied in enough detail.

Sacks did his early work by studying the recordings of people ringing an emergency psychiatric centre. The reason he chose these tapes is that they existed, at a time when tape recording was still quite rare. Because Sacks could get hold of these tapes he was able to study them over and over again to tease out the repeating patterns that indicated that people tended to 'know' how to play by (and in some cases break) the 'rules' of conversations, rules such as turn-taking.

The following three examples illustrate differing aspects of Conversation Analysis.

### Turn-taking

The transcript below is adapted from one of Sacks' lectures and relates to the work he did with tape recordings of phone calls to an emergency psychiatric centre.

Operator:	Go ahead please
A:	This is Mr Smith (B: Hello) of the Emergency Psychiatric Center can I help you.
B:	Hello?
A:	Hello
B:	I can't hear you.
A:	I see. Can you hear me now?
B:	Barely. Where are you in the womb?

In the transcript above B is calling the centre and A is based at the centre. Other research by Sacks showed that, in most cases, when the person answering the phone gives their name the caller also gives their name. The greeting from A gives his name and creates a pattern where the most 'expected' response is for B to take a turn in the conversation with an expectation that they would offer their name (which is useful in the context of calls to an emergency centre).

However, in this case B employs a tactic to avoid taking a turn and thereby avoiding the expectation of providing his/her name. This breaking of expectations is useful in that it highlights how well people understand the conventions of conversations.

When Sacks first advanced his ideas that people were processing conversations in this pattern predictable way, and were breaking patterns when necessary, there was a view that it was all happening too fast, that people simply could not be watching for such tiny pauses or changes in tone and responding. However, Sacks responded by saying "*First of all don't worry about whether they're 'thinking'. Just come to terms with how it is that [the detail of talk] comes off. Because you'll find they can do these things.*" (Sacks, 1992)

The implications of Conversation Analysis for brands and services are more often to be found at the tactical rather than the strategic level, for example by improving call centre procedures, by ensuring that that the conversation expectations of customers are understood, especially when there are cross-cultural issues (for example when a call-centre is offshore or where customers tend to come from other backgrounds, countries, and cultures). Techniques such as conflict resolution tend to

have a good craft, if not theoretical, understanding of Conversation Analysis, for example an understanding of approaches that will diffuse situations, that will close conversations, and that will help control expectations.

### Construction of a Delicate Object

The short extract below shows part of a detailed transcript of an interview between a counsellor (C) and a visitor (P) to an HIV testing centre. The transcript is taken from Silverman's "Construction of 'Delicate' Objects in Counselling", 1997.

1	<b>C</b>	Let's finish this HIV thing . . . Hhhhh So do you
2		understand about the antibodies.=
3	<b>P</b>	=Yes I [do:.
4	<b>C</b>	[Ri:ght. .hh So: .h how lo:ng is it since you
5		think (.) you might have been at ri:sk (.) of being
6		infected with HIV.
7	<b>P</b>	Well uh- (0.4) uhuh to tell you the truth it's only
8		I- like er Friday I had a phone call from a .h ex-
9		girlfriend- my boyfriend's ex-girlfriend .hh to say
10		that uh:m (0.5) she'd been to the VD clinic (0.2)
11		and she thought that I should go:

The sort of detailed transcript shown above is typical of the sort used for Conversation Analysis and was designed by Gail Jefferson and a full description of the transcription conventions can easily be found via the Internet.

Conversation Analysis suggests that researchers should use as little background information as possible when analysing conversations, relying solely on what can be observed. For example, Silverman did not use any knowledge that HIV and sexual counselling is a sensitive topic, preferring to look at transcripts such as the one above, to find evidence that a delicate object was being created.

At the point where the transcript starts the conversation has already been running for a while and the counsellor is turning to the core issue issues. The notation at the end of line 2 and at the start of line 3 shows that P started speaking immediately that C finished, without a pause.

The brackets in lines 3 and 4 show that C started speaking whilst P was still speaking, closing that topic and moving onto a question about how long P might have been at risk. C sets this question up with a slow "Ri:ght" a breath, and a short pause, all of which are signs consistent with a message that C intends to treat this question as sensitive.

In line 7 P starts with a holding phrase "Well", by a long pause (a pause of 0.4 seconds is often a signal that a turn is over, here it appears to be more a message about the nature of what will follow). The rest of lines 7 to 11 build on earlier parts of the conversation to establish a *footing*. The footing that P is conveying is that she is serially monogamous, she is visiting the clinic because she has been advised to, and because of something that somebody else has done. Within lines 7 to 11 there are pauses (one of 0.5 seconds) and repairs (the clarification that the ex-girlfriend was her partner's ex-girlfriend), and vocalised methods of slowing down the flow of the conversation (e.g. "Well uh-" in line 7). It is these patterns that identify to Silverman that a delicate subject is being constructed.

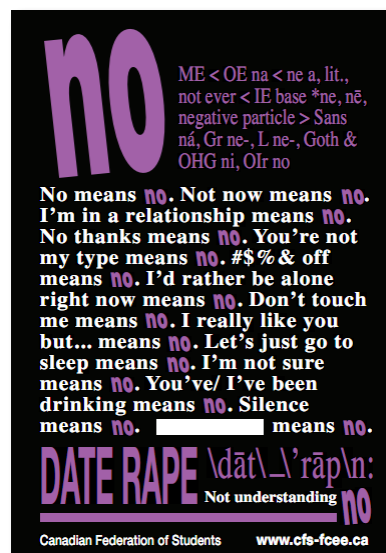


Translating this sort of analysis to the commercial world would include looking at issues such as dropped phone calls, failures to complain, customers not seeking advice, and variety of other cases in interactions, where a lack of specialist knowledge on the part of people representing the brand or service results in a sub-optimal outcome for the organisation, the customer, or both.

### Why Just Saying No is not so Easy

Kitzinger (1999) used a Discourse Analysis approach, largely based on Conversation Analysis, to investigate why the advice that had been given to women students to “just say no” was not as helpful or effective as it was intended to be. Kitzinger highlighted that ‘No’ can be a *dispreferred response*. In Western, English-speaking societies saying ‘Yes’ in response to a question is usually easy and does not require any further qualification. For example, in answer to the question ‘*Would you like to come to my flat for a coffee?*’, the answer ‘Yes’ or ‘Yes please’ does not require any explanation. However, the answer ‘No’ is typically seen as too blunt and is usually moderated, for example ‘*I would love to, but I have to be somewhere else*’ or ‘*Perhaps another time, today is not a good time.*’ In this context ‘No’ is a dispreferred response.

Kitzinger shows that by combining the dispreferred nature of the word ‘No’ with the pressures that surround the sexually charged area of dating, it can be seen that ‘*Just say no*’ is less useful than it might be, because saying ‘No’ is not actually easy or straightforward, using other constructions to say no is more natural and appropriate. Kitzinger also makes that point that men ought to be able to understand the various coded forms of no they are being offered, as Conversation Analysis illustrates the amazing skill that people possess with the way words are used in action. This point is well illustrated by the poster from the Canadian Federation of Students shown below:



In the commercial world the significance of preferred and dispreferred responses has long been appreciated, albeit intuitively/experientially as opposed to being accessed through a more formal understanding. Indeed mechanisms such as the *close* in a business meeting have long depended on these devices. However, habit and intuition can lead to many errors as well as insights, for example the habit of many waiters in restaurants of asking if everything is ‘*OK with the meal?*’, for which the almost universal response (in Western English speaking countries) is ‘*Yes thanks*’ – another example of ‘Yes’ being a socially preferred response, and ‘No’ being dispreferred. A strategy to improve

customer feedback during meals might utilise alternative approaches, such as allowing people to use their smartphone to convey their feelings, or perhaps giving people a large die on their table with the option of displaying a number in the range 1 to 6 to indicate their current state of happiness.

## Discursive Psychology

Discursive Psychology asks a question so bold as to be almost subversive! What if the neuroscientists and cognitive psychologists are looking in the wrong place when they are looking for phenomena such as attitudes and memory? What if these phenomena exist not in the head but in the discourse between people? It is important to note, from a commercial perspective, that it is not necessary to completely accept the argument of Discursive Psychology to realise that this alternative view potentially opens up new insights and opportunities.

To over simplify the argument, for reasons of clarity and brevity, Discursive Psychology is suggesting that traditional psychology uses what people say to *guess* what is going on in the mind. Discursive Psychology dismisses this as currently impossible and possibly misguided, preferring to categorise and study what people say as phenomena in their own right.

### What is Thinking?

There is a common, but Discourse Analysis would say misguided, view that thinking and communicating start with some amorphous ideas in our mind for which we find the right words, which we then articulate, and where the listener decodes these words back into the own amorphous thoughts – this is very much the structuralist view associated with people like Saussure. However, Wittgenstein (1958) posed the thought that “*the experience of thinking may just be the experience of saying*”, i.e. that when we think we normally think in words. Wittgenstein suggests that if we explore how we think about things we may well find it is analogous to talking to ourselves, in our heads.

For most people it is easy to highlight some situations where thinking is not done in words, for example if you were trying to think about how you tie a tie you are likely to envisage it in either pictures or by trying to recreate the hand and arm movements. But if you try to think about why you wear a tie, you are likely to find words running through your inner voice.

This view of thinking is linked to the view that if you can't say it then it is hard to think it, which is one of the reasons that many people advocate the practice that has become pejoratively known as political correctness. For example, if homophobic language is not available to people it will be harder for them to think homophobically. The same idea is explored, less positively, in George Orwell's 1984, where Newspeak is engineered to produce compliance by the population and adherence to Big Brother.

In a similar way, Professor VS Ramachandran, sees the use of metaphor as potentially one of the essential things that allowed humans to develop from a more primitive stage. The metaphor provides a mechanism to start a discourse about something that had previously not been articulated.

In terms of brands and services, examples of creating language to facilitate thought abound, for example, lien, loan, mortgage, debt, interest, premium, APR, surety, deposit, and overdraft all help facilitate the discussion, thought, and marketing of financial products and services. Similarly, the

introduction of phrases such as junk bond, sub-prime, negative equity, and over-extended allow the negative side of financial products and services to be thought of and spoken about in more detail and with greater precision. The use of metaphor is frequently used to position or re-position an idea or service, for example the micro-payment service Venmo use the metaphor *"It's like your phone and wallet had a baby"* to help people envisage their product.

## **Attitudes**

Traditional psychology makes much use of the concept of attitudes, for example describing them as *"an enduring organizational, motivational, emotional, perceptual, and cognitive process with respect to some aspect of an individual's world"* (Crutchfield & Krech, 1948). Because attitudes are thought to reside in the mind and to be of such importance, researchers seek to measure them via a variety of scales and techniques.

However, most researchers are all too familiar with the effect of framing and anchoring in asking attitude scale questions. As the framing and anchoring changes, so do the responses. Surely, if attitudes were the essential element that traditional models imply they would not be so unstable when researchers try to measure them? Even more worrying is the propensity of subjects to express contradictory views. For example, in February 2011 YouGov reported that 25% of UK citizens agreed with a scale that said *"As long as they are peaceful people should not be prosecuted for making a protest, even if their views are extreme and likely to offend many people."* However, 82% of the same respondents in the same survey agreed with the prosecution of Emdadur Choudhury who burned poppies on a protest on Armistice Day 2010.

Discursive Psychology that highlights so called common-sense is seen as essential to negotiating a social world, acting as a lubricant of interactions. However, the robustness of common-sense is that it is built upon contradictory pairs, for example:

*'Many hands make light' work and 'Too many cooks spoil the broth'.*

*'Knowledge is power' and 'Ignorance is bliss'.*

*'Look before you leap' and 'He who hesitates is lost'.*

*'Clothes make the man' and 'Never judge a book by its cover'.*

An alternative model for attitudes is that people carry a sort of portmanteau of responses to all of the situations that they are likely to encounter. The way these responses are selected and utilised was foreshadowed by Wittgenstein's language games and Austin's speech acts, and the way that the portmanteau is filled may well fit the models described by Foucault and Bakhtin.

In the commercial world this view fits well with the traditional view that brands have personalities, that products are seen to convey characteristics (think rugged LandRover, versus sexist Lynx, versus caring Dove). Clearly, if brands have personalities, views, and attitudes, these will not be found in the 'mind' but may be studied in discourse.

## **Memory**

Much of the 'science' of memory looks at concepts such as MOPs (Memory Organisation Packets) which can be described but which are hard to put under the microscope. But others (e.g. Halbwachs,

1980) have argued that memory is essentially social (or at least a significant component of it is social). Putting together the observations of Wittgenstein (thinking is speaking) and Bakhtin (everything that is said is in response to something that was said before), suggests a model where memories are (in many cases) words and that these words have been negotiated and shared with others.

If we think of a mother and child sitting together looking at a family photo album we can see shared memories being created. Similarly, the night after a party, especially with aid of Facebook, the events of the previous 24 hours are often *negotiated* as people fill in different details. In a group discussion situation, a negative person can facilitate the other group members in *recalling* their negative 'feelings' and may actually create new negative, shared memories.

This shared, negotiated memory is one of the reasons that word of mouth is so powerful in markets, it does not just pass information from person-to-person, it changes and creates memories, which is why Fred Reichheld makes so much of *promoters* and *detractors* in the context of his Net Promoter Score, and why Rijn Vogelaar (2010) highlights the role of Superpromoters (and their negative opposite). Many people can 'remember' that Volvo is safe, that Bose speakers are clear, and that Belgian chocolate tastes good without ever conducting their own trials and experiences.

## Foucault and Foucauldian Discourse Analysis

Michel Foucault's approach to discourse analysis shifts the focus away from specific conversations to the wider societal use of language. Foucault sees all meaning as being created via discourse. This does not mean that something like a tree does not exist until it is talked about but rather that it does not have meaning in society until there is a discourse associated with it. In the field of brands and services we can see this phenomenon at play whenever a new term or phrase unlocks a new way of thinking about a product or service. For example, there may have been airlines who charged less or provided less for many years, but it was the discourse of '*no frills*' and '*low cost airlines*' that created the market, the pressure for deregulation, and the growth of a new sector.

Foucault shares with other Discourse Analysis traditions the idea that language is contested and relates to the employment and deployment of power, but unlike some thinkers, Foucault rejects the idea that it is the powerful who impose language, preferring a view that all language users are constrained by the current rules about what things mean, of what is sayable, and what is thinkable, but who at the same time all contribute to changes in the discourse.

Foucault envisioned discourse in a historical context, where language progressed through different *epistemes*, creating *regimes of truth*, and which can be explored via a specific form of historical analysis called *genealogy*. As an example of a regime, of truth Foucault quotes the medieval view of witches. Whilst we might feel, today, that there was no such thing as witches, at the time to be accused and found guilty of being a witch had the power of truth and resulted in tens or possibly hundreds of thousands of women in Europe being executed/murdered in a variety of horrific ways between about 1450 and 1750.

In terms of brands and services, we can use the prism that Foucault created to re-visit the well-known case study about the development of the Betty Crocker baking products. When the products were being tested and refined they discovered it was necessary to ask the housewife to add an egg

to the contents of the packet when ‘baking’ a cake in order to fit with the regime of truth of home cooking of the 1950s in the USA.

## **Social Media Research – a Pragmatic Extension**

Most proponents of Discourse Analysis would probably balk at including most social media research within their definition of Discourse Analysis, since most social media research does not have a clear theoretical basis or an articulated epistemological position. For example, is social media monitoring about what people say, or is it being used as a clue to some other unobservable phenomena? This is particularly true of a technique such as automated sentiment analysis, where the researcher is often trying to ascribe ‘true’ feelings about a product or service. Similarly, in the study of influencers the object is to use patterns of *who* says what to *whom* to identify *individuals*, rather than to identify processes or patterns.

However, in a paper targeted at the commercial world it does not seem sensible to leave out common and popular analysis techniques just because they do not conform to an academic or social sciences model of Discourse Analysis. For those wishing to find a more academically defensible reason to include techniques such as social media monitoring then perhaps it might be useful to think of these pragmatic approaches as being akin to action research or critical research, where the tools of research are expressly utilised to attempt to achieve specific aims. In the case of critical research that specific aim might be emancipatory (as in the case of feminist research), in the field of products and services that aim is more likely to be improved ROI, or perhaps, more prosaically, happier customers.

### **Social Media Research**

In many ways social media research, be it social media monitoring, netnography, blog and buzz mining, or online research communities, is the ‘hottest kid’ on the research ‘block’ and the number of available options, tools, and approaches are expanding rapidly.

Amongst the key topics that are being pursued via social media research are:

- Influence.
- Memes.
- Sentiment analysis.
- Conversation Analysis of online communities.

## **Putting Discourse Analysis to Work in the Commercial Sector**

This last and concluding section of the paper looks at the opportunities that Discourse Analysis creates for brands and services, in both the private and public sectors, and in both tactical and strategic fields.

For example, in the realm of tactical issues, opportunities include training off-shore call centres using Conversation Analysis, improving social media monitoring (going beyond just counting hits and moving into Psycholinguistics), and improving customer interaction training, e.g. use of change of footing to keep sales leads open, to close time wasting interactions, and to resolve conflicts.

In terms of strategic issues, examples of options created by Discourse Analysis include: rethinking customer satisfaction, brand positioning (what are the merits and the discourse conventions if the brand were to be a friend, an advisor, an expert?), and advertising (creating speech acts, sayable ideas, genealogies, etc).

Although Discourse Analysis is relatively new, especially in terms of its utilisation in a commercial context, people are very familiar with how it works, because it is how people negotiate their day-to-day, social experience. We are all skilled at dynamically analysing conversations, of recognising changes in footing, and identifying dispreferred responses. However, a formal approach offers the chance to move from an intuitive and craft level to a more optimised approach, where brands and service can better use the rules, conventions, and opportunities of discourse.

### **Re-thinking Customer Satisfaction**

As an example of the changes that Discourse Analysis might offer consider customer satisfaction. Discourse Analysis suggests a very different approach to customer satisfaction, a topic normally considered a core part of the strategy of most brands and services. In the traditional model the thinking concentrates on the 'true' states of mind amongst consumers, making customers 'feel' or 'believe' that they were satisfied, in the belief that satisfied customers will buy more than unhappy customers.

Adopting a Discourse Analysis approach to customer satisfaction might produce some very different actions and outcomes. For example, instead of thinking about what we want people to feel, we might think about what we want people to say, which means we can measure it directly, rather than indirectly. Once we have thought about what we want people to say we can review whether these words are actually 'sayable'. Are these words/phrases the sorts of things that people ever say about this sort of product or service? Are they sayable about this brand? For example, when thinking about long haul flying, are words like 'delighted' sayable? Are the words excited, interesting, or exhilarating used in contexts that are positive in the context of long distance flights?

When we consider the language that people use about a service or brand we might consider what we can change what people can 'say'? Can a bank be caring? Can a sauce in a jar be exotic? Can we shift the blame for bad rail service away from our brand towards, say, the Government, perhaps change the footing of the discourse so that the brand is positioned as a fellow victim or even as a friend who is doing their best?

What are the phrases/terms/words that are already used in the discourse about the brand or service? What about analogous brands and services? What metaphors might be applicable? Are any of the alternatives associated with positive outcomes? Consider why and how easyJet became the '*cheap and cheerful*' airline, Apple the design brand, and how Volvo and Miele utilised the language of engineering.

### **Conclusion**

This paper makes the case that Discourse Analysis has come of age in the academic world and it is time that it was adopted by brands and services. Several of the key memes of the moment, for example *people power*, *listening is the new asking*, and *word of mouth* all relate to discourses.

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