Text, Context, Pretext
Language in Society

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Text, Context, Pretext

*Critical Issues in Discourse Analysis*

H. G. Widdowson
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This book is, in a sense, a reconceptualized and extended version of one that was unwritten and unpublished thirty years ago. This itself would have been a revised version of my PhD thesis, entitled ‘An applied linguistic approach to discourse analysis’, submitted in 1973, in the early stages of my academic career.

Immodest though it might seem, I would like to acknowledge the work of this author, my former self, for it was here that many of the issues in discourse analysis (then a newly burgeoning growth in the field of linguistics) were first addressed and tentatively explored. To my later regret, I declined the offer to publish a write-up of my thesis, preferring to draw on it in the writing of a number of papers in applied linguistics and language education. Not surprisingly, when discourse analysis subsequently became fashionable within mainstream linguistics, my own early efforts in the applied linguistics backwaters went unnoticed, much, I must confess, to my chagrin. It was irritating to find ideas that (as I saw it) I had anticipated in my own writing, and expounded with such brilliance, re-emerging with all the appearance of novelty in the work of other people without so much as a nod of recognition or acknowledgement. But this is, of course, a familiar academic experience and as the years go by the frustrations fade, resentment is revealed as petty and misplaced, and a new and wiser realization dawns that ideas, like a kind of benign intellectual infection, spread in different minds in all sorts of ways and cannot be readily or reliably traced to particular sources.

Times have moved on since 1973. I have changed, and so has the field. Both, I like to think, for the better. Although many of the issues discussed in this book were first broached in the earlier unpublished one, they have also been taken up independently, conjured with, reformulated in a variety of ways by scholars of different disciplinary persuasions under the names of discourse analysis, conversation analysis, speech act analysis, pragmatics and so on. The concepts of discourse, text and context, which figure prominently

**Preface**
in the work of my prentice period, have all been subjected by others to extensive and impressive enquiry over the intervening years, and many a textbook is available to bring enlightenment on these matters to the novice student. Even so, it seems to me that the relationship between them remains problematic, and it is this that justifies the reconsideration I give to them in the early chapters of this present book. The third term that appears in my title, pretext, calls for more detailed comment, and I will come to that presently.

My interest in these theoretical matters remained a steady current in my mind over twenty years, but was galvanized by the rapid rise to fashionable prominence of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Here was a development in linguistics which claimed to be applicable to the immediate and pressing concerns of the non-scholarly world. Here was, it seemed, work which came under the very rubric of my thesis all those years ago: an applied linguistic approach to discourse analysis; but with an important difference. Whereas I had thought of language teaching as the main area of practical concern which discourse analysis could be relevant to, CDA had a much more ambitious and much more significant agenda. Its concern was to educate people more broadly in the abuse of power by linguistic means, to reveal how language is used for deception and distortion and the fostering of prejudice. Here was an approach to discourse analysis whose significance could hardly be exaggerated.

For there has surely never been a time when the need for such an investigation is so urgent, when public uses of language have been so monopolized to further political and capitalist interests to the detriment of public well-being and in denial of human rights and social justice. Over recent years, the cynical abuse of language to deceive by doublethink that characterizes the fictional dystopia of Orwell’s 1984 has become a reality of everyday life. Ecological devastation goes under the verbal guise of economic development, and millions of people are kept subject to poverty, reduced to desperation, deprived of liberty and life in the name of democratic values and a globalized market economy that is said to be free. So much of the language we come across in print and on screen seems to be designed to deceive, used as a front, a cover-up of ulterior motives. This is an aspect of discourse, the effect that a particular use of language is designed to bring about, that I refer to as pretext.

And it was just this aspect that CDA focused attention on, particularly as it related to the insinuation of ideological influence and the covert control of opinion. It had, in principle, an initial appeal for me on two counts: it promised not only to extend the scope of discourse analysis as such, but to...
do so with the express applied linguistic purpose of engaging with real world issues of immediate and pressing importance.

Regrettably, my further acquaintance with CDA had an adverse effect on this initial appeal, for reasons which I discuss in detail in the second half of this book. Whether these reasons are valid or not I must leave the reader to decide, but what I want to stress here is that it is not the cause of CDA that I call into question, for it is one that, as will be evident from my earlier comments, I wholeheartedly endorse. Where I take issue with CDA is in the mode of analysis and interpretation it adopts by way of promoting this cause. The need to demonstrate how discourse analysis can contribute to a critical awareness of the ways in which language is used, and abused, to exercise control and practise deception remains as pressing as ever. CDA, to its great credit, has alerted us to this need, and although, as will be apparent in this book, I have serious reservations about the way it does its work, I recognize too that it has the effect of giving point and purpose to discourse analysis by giving prominence to crucial questions about its socio-political significance which might otherwise have been marginalized.

This book is confrontational and uncompromising in its criticism, and I am aware that it will not endear me to some of my colleagues working in the field of discourse analysis, critical or otherwise. But my quarrel is with arguments, analyses, and the claims that are made for them, and not with people. We are all concerned with issues which have a significance compared with which individual sensitivities are trivial, and it should be possible to engage in adversarial argument about them without causing any serious hurt. But this, of course, is easier said than done, for people, and I am myself certainly no exception, quite naturally invest their emotional selves in their thinking, and the animation and animosity of intellectual exchange are always difficult to keep apart. All I can say is that no offence is intended, and I hope to be forgiven if any is taken. And in mitigation, I acknowledge, in all sincerity, the achievement and distinction of those people whose work has inspired my criticism: Norman Fairclough, Michael Halliday, Michael Stubbs, Ruth Wodak in particular. My disagreement with them does not diminish my indebtedness: they have all made crucial and indeed indispensable contributions to this book.

I also owe thanks to the counsel and support of those colleagues whose views are more congruent with mine, and in particular to two people, Kieran O’Halloran and Peter Trudgill, who have read and commented with impressive insight on an earlier draft of this book. My thanks, too, to Katharina Breyer for all her dedicated work on the index. Most thanks of all go to the person to whom the book itself is dedicated, Barbara Seidlhofer,
who gives me counsel and support, intellectual and emotional, in everything I do.

H. G. W.
Vienna, February 2004

Sources

Certain chapters of this book are developed from papers published in various places over the past ten years.


Although discourse analysis has been a busy field of activity for many years, there is a good deal of uncertainty about what it actually is. The generally accepted view is that it has something to do with looking at language ‘above’ or ‘beyond’ the sentence, but this is hardly an exact formulation. Even when the term discourse analysis is used as a book title, as it is in a key work by Michael Stubbs, it is not always clear just what the term is intended to signify: ‘Roughly speaking, it refers to attempts to study the organization of language above the sentence, or above the clause, and therefore to study larger linguistic units, such as conversational exchanges or written texts’ (Stubbs 1983:1).

Even roughly speaking, this is an unsatisfactory description on a number of counts. To begin with, it is not clear whether Stubbs is using the terms clause and sentence to mean the same thing or not. This is not a terminological quibble. It makes a good deal of difference whether the linguistic organization to be analysed is above a clause or above a sentence. If it is above the clause, analysis would presumably take into account complex and compound units which would be conventionally defined as syntactic constituents and so below the sentence. Rules for co-ordination and embedding, which figure prominently, for example, in transformational grammar, would in this case be considered examples of discourse analysis.

This would actually be consistent with what Zellig Harris had in mind when he first used the term fifty years ago. He too was looking at how language is organized as ‘connected discourse’, by which he meant how patterns of formal equivalence might be discerned across sentences in stretches of what he calls morpheme sequences in actually occurring text. Equivalence, as Harris is at pains to point out, has nothing to do with what semantic meaning these stretches have but with the textual environments in which they appear. He illustrates the notion by asking us to suppose that in a particular text the following sentences occur:
The trees turn here about the **middle** of **autumn**; The trees turn here about the **end** of **October**; The **first frost** comes after the middle of autumn; We **start heating** after the end of October.

The expressions I have put in bold here would be equivalent in that they share the same environment, and being equivalent they provide the same environment for the italicized expressions in the second pair of sentences, so that they too are equivalent with each other. If the text were to continue:

We always have a lot of **trouble** when we start heating **but you’ve got to be prepared** when the first frost comes.

By the same process, the underlined expressions here are assigned equivalent status on the basis of their environment, which has already been established as the same by the preceding analysis. And we proceed in a kind of chain reaction mode, with one set of equivalences providing the environmental conditions for another (Harris 1952:6–7).

So far, the analysis simply involves identifying recurrent morpheme sequences which are actually present in the text, but Harris then goes on to assign equivalence on the basis of underlying structural similarity established by means of transformations. So, for example, we can say that a sentence that occurs in the text, like We **start heating** after the end of October, is equivalent to its transform After the end of October, we **start heating**, which does not. By the same criteria any sentence like Casals plays the cello is equivalent to one that takes the form The cello is played by Casals (these are Harris’s examples). This procedure of establishing equivalence in absentia, so to speak, is, says Harris,

the same basic operation, that of comparing different sentences. And it will serve the same end: to show that two otherwise different sentences contain the same combination of equivalence classes even though they may contain different combinations of morphemes. What is new is only that we base our equivalence not on a comparison of two sentences in the text, but on a comparison of a sentence in the text with sentences outside the text. (Harris 1952:19)

The transformations that Harris uses to identify structural equivalences underlying different morphemic manifestations on the surface are essentially devices of the same order as those subsequently adopted by Chomsky in the design of generative grammar. They are in both cases formal operations
on sentence constituents. What Harris was doing would appear on the face of it to be discourse analysis as Stubbs defines it, for he was studying how language is organized above the sentence by analysing ‘larger linguistic units’. Discourse analysis in this conception is simply a matter of extending the scope of grammar. Though this is itself not, of course, a simple matter, there is, as Stubbs would agree, rather more to it than that.

Harris himself acknowledges as much by pointing out the limitation of his enterprise: identifying the underlying structural patterns that make connections across sentences tells us nothing about what they might mean. As he puts it:

All this, however, is still distinct from an interpretation of the findings, which must take the meaning of morphemes into consideration and ask what the author was about when he produced the text. Such interpretation is obviously quite separate from the formal findings, although it may follow closely in the directions which the formal findings indicate. (Harris 1952:29)

For Harris, clearly, discourse analysis is a set of procedures for establishing underlying formal equivalences within a text. Although his work is motivated by the belief that ‘Language does not occur in stray words or sentences, but in connected discourse’ (Harris 1952:3), it is the connectedness itself that is focused on rather than on its discourse implication. He looks beyond the bounds of the sentence, it is true, but his vision is essentially that of the sentence grammarian.

Discourse analysis can be said to date back to Harris. But his celebrated article is of more than just historical interest. Even this very brief discussion of it raises a number of questions which have remained stubbornly problematic to this day. I mark them down here as issues to be taken up in this book.

- If discourse analysis is defined as the study of language patterns above the sentence, this would seem to imply that discourse is sentence writ large: quantitatively different but qualitatively the same phenomenon. It would follow, too, of course, that you cannot have discourse below the sentence.
- If the difference between sentence and discourse is not a matter of kind but only of degree, then they are presumably assumed to signal the same kind of meaning. If sentence meaning is intrinsically encoded, that is to say, a semantic property of the language itself, then so is discourse meaning.
In the quotation cited above, however, Harris talks about interpretation as involving two factors: ‘the meanings of the morphemes’, which presumably refers to semantics and ‘what the author was about when he produced the text’, which brings in pragmatic considerations like intention. So interpretation cannot just be read off from the text as if it were an elongated sentence. But then if semantic and pragmatic meanings are different, how are they different, and by what principles can they be related?

Harris says that interpretation ‘may follow closely in the directions which the formal findings indicate’. How then do such findings direct interpretation?

In the quotation, Harris talks of interpretation as if this were a matter of finding out ‘what the author was about’, thereby equating it with the discovery of intention. But what a first-person author means by a text is not the same as what the text might mean to a second-person reader (or listener), or indeed to a third-person analyst. How then are these different perspectives to be reconciled?

Harris uses the term discourse in the title of his paper, and occasionally within it; the term that figures most prominently in the account of his analysis is text. It would seem that for him the terms are synonymous. Is there a case for making a conceptual distinction between them?

These issues are closely interrelated, of course, and, as we shall see, the discussion of any one of them will necessarily bring others in by implication. Let us begin with the synonymous use of the terms text and discourse. We have already noted that Harris appears to conflate them, using both to refer to the language that an author produces. Stubbs does not distinguish them either: both terms refer to ‘language above the sentence, or above the clause’, that is to say ‘larger linguistic units, such as conversational exchanges or written texts’. I pointed out earlier that there is a crucial difference between language above the sentence and language above the clause. A consideration of the latter will include syntactic relations among sentence constituents and will come within the scope of grammar. If one looks for patterns of language above the sentence, however, then one goes beyond the bounds of conventional grammar and one needs to look for other principles of ordering.

What further confuses the issue is the reference that Stubbs makes to ‘written texts’. For here we find sentences of an orthographic kind, the written utterances of actually performed language of a different order from sentences as abstract grammatical constructs. And these written utterances
will often take the form of linguistic units consisting of many grammatical sentences, or (as we shall see) of no sentence, or clause, at all, and the form they take is determined by just the kind of pragmatic intention that Harris excludes from consideration.

Since *discourse* analysis is said to apply to written *texts*, Stubbs, it would seem, makes no clear distinction between the terms. And this is borne out by remarks he makes a little later in the same (introductory) chapter to his book. The terms, he tells us, are ‘often ambiguous and confusing’, but seeing no need to disambiguate or clarify them, he simply comments: ‘One often talks of “written text” versus “spoken discourse” . . . “discourse” implies length whereas a “text” may be very short’ (Stubbs 1983:9). Presumably a text cannot be all that short since, by Stubbs’s own definition, it would have to be a larger linguistic unit than a sentence to qualify for discourse analysis at all. But for Stubbs the fact that the terms *text* and *discourse* are ‘confusing and ambiguous’, does not really matter, since for him nothing essential hangs on the distinction: his 1983 book is called *Discourse Analysis*, his later book has *text analysis* in its title. Clearly he finds no place for the distinction in his own work, and seems sceptical of its significance in the work of others. He comments:

One brief point about terminology. There is considerable variation in how terms such as *text* and *discourse* are used in linguistics. Sometimes this terminological variation signals important conceptual distinctions, but often it does not, and terminological debates are usually of little interest. These distinctions in terminology and concept will only occasionally be relevant for my argument, and when they are, I draw attention to them (e.g. in section 7.2). (Stubbs 1996:4)

No indication is given as to when the distinction is conceptually significant and when it is not. One may concede that debates about terminological distinctions as such are of little interest, but they clearly cannot be so summarily dismissed when they have conceptual substance, as they apparently do, occasionally, in Stubbs’s own work, though just where and how is actually never made evident. Section 7.2, to which he draws the reader’s attention, does not actually address the issue at all.¹

Stubbs is not alone in the indiscriminate use of the terms *text* and *discourse* to refer to language above the sentence. It is indeed so orthodox a view that it seems perverse, not to say foolhardy, to question it.² Here it is again as expressed without equivocation by Wallace Chafe in no less authoritative a work than the *Oxford International Encyclopedia of Linguistics*:
The term ‘discourse’ is used in somewhat different ways by different scholars, but underlying the differences is a common concern for language beyond the boundaries of isolated sentences. The term TEXT is used in similar ways. Both terms may refer to a unit of language larger than the sentence: one may speak of a ‘discourse’ or a ‘text’. (Chafe 1992:356, 2003:439–40)

One may indeed so speak, and scholars do. But is it helpful so to speak? Hoey, noting how some scholars are indifferent to the distinction, and other inconsistent in their use of it, makes the observation: ‘And yet the distinction continues to be made. It is as if some basic differentiation is felt to exist that people cannot quite agree on but cannot leave alone’ (Hoey 1991:197). Let us then consider how far this feeling might be substantiated and the differentiation justified.

We can begin with the question of how we deal with uses of language which are indeed very short texts, taking as they do the form of isolated sentences. The most obvious instances of such texts are public notices like

TRESPASSERS WILL BE PROSECUTED
STICK NO BILLS
HANDLE WITH CARE

and so on. These, on the Chafe criterion, are not texts at all since they have no other sentences to keep them company. And yet they are intuitively textual in that they are not fragments or components of any larger linguistic whole but are complete communicative units, separate speech events as Hymes might call them (Hymes 1968).

In view of this, we might concede that in certain circumstances single, isolated sentences can serve as texts. But then the question inevitably arises as to what these circumstances might be. And this in turn might lead us to suspect that perhaps it is these circumstances and not the size of the linguistic unit which determines textuality, and that whether a piece of language is larger than a sentence has little if anything to with it. This suspicion is strengthened by the obvious fact that there are instances of language which have all the appearance of complete texts, but which do not even consist of separate sentences but of isolated phrases and words. Public notices again:

NO ENTRY
CHILDREN CROSSING
HARD HAT AREA
TRAINS TOILETS GENTLEMEN LADIES SILENCE PRIVATE OPEN CLOSED IN OUT
and so on. Here there is no sentence in sight, but only noun phrases, nouns, adjectives, adverbs, parts of speech in grammatical limbo, constituents that have somehow declared independence from syntax and are on their own.

But it is not only that parts of sentences seem to take on textual independence. Parts of words do as well, even those parts, like the graphological letter, which have no encoded meaning whatever. Thus the single letter W signals to me where I am to register for a conference. The single letter P tells me where to park my car. These are notices which apparently function in just the same way as others less sparing with language. Do we say that they are non-texts on the grounds that they are smaller than a sentence? This does not seem to be a very satisfactory way of proceeding.5

It might be objected that I am giving unwarranted attention to relatively trivial uses of language. These are texts, if you like, but minimal texts. But the interesting question surely is how they can be texts when they are so minimal. One answer might be that they are a sort of shorthand: they stand for larger texts, rather like acronyms. Just as PTO at the bottom of a letter stands for the sentence Please turn over, so P stands for Parking. But this is still a one-word text. Well then, Parking in turn stands for Parking is permitted here or Here is a place for parking your car, or something along these lines: shorthand.

These still do not meet the Chafe criterion, of course, since we have still not gone beyond the boundaries of isolated sentences’. But quite apart from that, how do those who write such shorthand know that I will interpret it as intended? How do they know how minimal they can be? The letters BBC can indeed be said to stand for the British Broadcasting Corporation, BC for Before Christ (or British Columbia), NYPD for New York Police Department, and so on. These are established encodings with fixed denotations, symbolically secure. But P does not have the same fixity of meaning. If I see it as a notice at the side of a country road I interpret it as referring to a small space at the side of the road, a so-called lay-by, where I can pull in for a brief stay. If I see the letter P as a notice in a street in the middle of the city, I know that it refers to something entirely different: to a covered concrete place, a multi-storey edifice, where I pay to leave my car. In other words, how I interpret the text P depends on where I see it and what I know about the lay-by and the multi-storey car park. It depends, in other words, on relating the text to something outside itself, that is to say to the context: to where it is located on the one hand, and to how, on the other hand, it keys in with my knowledge of reality as shaped and sanctioned by the society I live in – that is to say, my social knowledge. P is a linguistic symbol, a letter of the alphabet, an element of English graphology. But that
is not how I interpret it when it figures as a text. I read it not as a conventional element of the code but as an index whose function is to point away from itself to the context, and so indicate where meaning is to be found elsewhere.

The same point can be made about the other texts we have been considering. When I see the one word TRAINS, for example, written on the wall of Russell Square underground station in London, I know that it refers to the trains of the Piccadilly Line proceeding westbound towards Hammersmith. And I also know that it not only has reference to a particular direction—westwards, but it has the force of a direction in a quite different illocutionary sense as well—come this way to the trains. But the same word can serve as a totally different text and invoke a quite different interpretation, where reference is to other trains with the force of a warning. Similarly, when I see the notice TRESPASSERS WILL BE PROSECUTED, its location and my familiarity with such notices will lead me to infer that it is meant to have the force of prohibition in reference to individuals who might be tempted to stray onto this particular piece of private land. I know that it is not meant to refer generically to all who trespass or to have the force of a general assertion about their fate; like SINNERS WILL BE DAMNED or THE MEEK WILL INHERIT THE EARTH.

How do I know all these things? Obviously because I have been socialized into a particular reality and know how to use language to engage indexically with it. I recognize a piece of language as a text not because of its linguistic size, but because I assume it is intended to key into this reality. Texts can come in all shapes and sizes: they can correspond in extent with any linguistic unit: letter, sound, word, sentence, combination of sentences. To put the matter more briskly, I identify a text not by its linguistic extent but by its social intent.

But identifying something as a text is not the same as interpreting it. You may recognize intentionality but not know the intention. This is where discourse comes in, and why it needs to be distinguished from text. As I have tried to show, we achieve meaning by indexical realization, that is to say by using language to engage our extralinguistic reality. Unless it is activated by this contextual connection, the text is inert. It is this activation, this acting of context on code, this indexical conversion of the symbol that I refer to as discourse. Discourse in this view is the pragmatic process of meaning negotiation. Text is its product.6

The main concern of this book is to explore the relationship between text and discourse, between the language people produce and which provides objective data for linguistic analysis, and the way this is processed by the