

## Discourse Analysis

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International organizations (IOs) are the setting for the production and dissemination of overlapping discourses. They annually publish thousands of documents in which one word can be debated over years of negotiations. Discourse analysis assists scholars to grasp both internal processes of discourse production within organizations and the impact of IOs' discourses in the making of global politics.

### What?

Since the “linguistic turn” in the 1960s, the social sciences and humanities have increasingly made discourse an object of social enquiry, challenging the idea of language as a neutral medium of communication. The concept of discourse—broadly defined as language in context—highlights processual and interactional dimensions of meaning-making, foregrounding the coproduction of discourses and sociopolitical configurations. Scholars have developed a rich theoretical and methodological tradition, often referred to under the umbrella term “discourse analysis” (DA). More than other textual methods focusing on manifest dimensions of language (like content analysis, see chapter 17—*Computerized Text Analysis*), DA examines the implicit dimensions of language and how they interact with invisible aspects of world politics. DA focuses on contextual and productive effects of words and speech: scholars can study processes that are otherwise hard to assess empirically like norm creation. It enables researchers to study naturally occurring discourses, such as in legal documents and policy reports, as well as discourses generated through elicitation techniques such as interviews and surveys.

A variety of methodological options are available for IO researchers interested in using DA. Rather than a strict rule book, DA encompasses both a theoretical-ontological approach—the idea that discourse plays a role in society and world politics—and a flexible set of methods to empirically investigate this idea. DA allows researchers to approach discourses either as a *source*, to identify what they reflect (e.g., norms, ideologies), or as a *practice*, to investigate what they produce (e.g., discriminations, identities).

DA proposes two main approaches. The first, following Michel Foucault, takes *a* discourse (or several) as the main unit of analysis, such as the emergence of a new discourse defining madness as an illness legitimizing the institutionalization of psychiatry (1965). The second approach, well-established since the 1980s, focuses on the linguistic dimensions of discourse to investigate how different wordings can reflect and produce different sociopolitical orders. For instance, Critical Discourse Analysis investigates how the use of linguistic devices, like the passive voice, produce power relations and prejudice.

## Why?

In IO studies and IR more broadly, many scholars engage with discourse without explicitly claiming to do DA. This highlights the potentially broad appeal of DA, but also trepidation about using a method that seems to require mastery of complex ontological and epistemological debates. We identify four overlapping types of puzzles that DA can help uncover.

First, DA provides tools to analyze *agenda-setting and framing processes* by unpacking the ways IOs represent global problems. IOs are discursive sites where meanings are negotiated in interaction, and interfaces through which representations circulate across the world. For instance, exploring the “social life of text” in climate negotiations, Aykut analyzes the mechanisms through which outcome documents exclude different issues and framings, which then translate into governance features (2017). Moretti and Pestre stress the role of derived abstract nouns in World Bank reports, which turn actions and processes into “abstract objects” (2015: 90).

Second, DA is useful to investigate *global norm setting* and the establishment of governance regimes. Epstein, for instance, uses DA to show the normalization of a global antiwhaling discourse: she denaturalizes what is assumed to be the “right” discourse (i.e., antiwhaling) by tracing its historical development and the symbols embedded within it (2008). Likewise, Zanotti (2008) conducts a genealogy of UN texts on peacekeeping in Haiti

and shows how dimensions of UN discourses inherited from the Enlightenment led to unintended consequences in regard to peacebuilding practices and democratization aspirations. Krook and True use a discursive understanding of norm change to explain outcomes in gender-balanced decision-making and gender mainstreaming in the UN campaign to promote gender equality (2010: 105–6).

Third, DA helps assess how actors use *IOs as discursive arenas* and the ways *IOs engage in self-legitimation*. Donahue and Prosser analyze discourses occurring in the UN as “diplomatic speech-making” (1997: 1). Shepherd maps the construction of “civil society” in UN peacebuilding discourse, showing how that discourse (re)produces the UN itself as the “legitimate knower of peacebuilding practice” while casting local communities as “known objects” (2015: 887). Likewise, von Billerbeck shows that peacekeeping officials in the UN Secretariat maintain a cohesive and legitimate organizational identity by relying on discourses that “simplify” and “exceptionalise” their work (2020: 1).

Finally, DA critically examines *prevailing power dynamics*, showing how discourse can “perpetuate, institutionalize, and legitimate asymmetries of power” (Holzscheiter 2014: 150). IOs normalize and legitimize competing discourses, which represent and benefit different types of actors. For example, Rist challenges the supposedly neutral nature of IO “reports” by showing that their prescriptive character is reflected in the use of the imperative mode, the verb “must,” and passive forms (2002: 39). Pratt uses DA to critically examine UN Security Council Resolution 1325. She argues that the resolution reproduces structures of power that embody “gendered, racialized, and sexualized hierarchies,” which in turn underpin hegemonic discourses and security practices of the post 9/11 era (2013: 780).

## How?

Many researchers will select a specific DA method by emulating the work of scholars who explore similar research questions or by matching their approach to an existing theoretical framework (e.g., poststructuralist DA for poststructuralism, or genealogy for power-knowledge). For instance, researchers may draw inspiration from Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which provides an established approach for analyzing discourse through three elements (Fairclough 2003): the genre or the form that structures discourse, like a news report, political speech, resolution, and so forth; the style, which considers the “manner of doing things” linguistically (Balker 2011:

141); and the ideational content of the discourse. Traditionally, this is done using a qualitative approach, although recently some scholars have sought to combine CDA with quantitative methods. Felli (2016), for example, analyzes the World Bank's discourse on resilience by documenting an increase in occurrences of the lemma "resilien-" in the annual World Development reports, which he then codes according to Fairclough's three elements.

However, in many cases, there is no ready-made DA method matching the specific needs of one's research. This is common when a scholar's research question flows inductively from specific texts (e.g., IMF working papers) or from a puzzling discursive event such as a UN General Assembly debate that unfolds in a surprising way. In such cases, we encourage researchers to create a *bespoke method* for themselves by making innovative use of the DA tools already available in a four-step process. We refer to this sort of "do-it-yourself DA" as "Bespoke Discourse Analysis."

### Step 1: Corpus Construction and Data Collection

- A. Constructing the corpus: a corpus is a large and structured set of documents constructed for a specific purpose. Defining it is paramount and requires trade-offs between breadth (size of the corpus) and depth (number of discursive mechanisms examined and richness of contextualization). These sampling trade-offs may depend on issues around access and availability. Some texts, like UN Security Council resolutions, are easily accessible online and translated into six languages. Others, like disciplinary proceedings or the results of an internal UN investigation, are much harder to access. Researchers need to carefully consider the institutional logics and power dynamics in which discourses are embedded; the important thing is to be transparent about challenges and justify one's choices.
- B. Selecting the data sources: the type of data being collected should match the research question, which can be revised and adapted during the project. Conclusions must then only be inferred based on the available material. Multi-method designs are often required to address discursive questions that textual analysis alone cannot answer. For example, researchers cannot assess the impact of policy discourse from the African Union nor claim to capture authors' intentions based *only* on the textual analysis of policy

documents. Researchers may collect such additional data themselves or draw from the existing literature.

### *Step 2: Mapping the Context and Preliminary Analysis*

- A. Mapping the context: DA can be understood as the interpretation of texts and speech *in the context* in which they are produced and received. It is therefore important to understand and mobilize elements of the context to produce a rigorous interpretation. Different dimensions of the context need to take into account (i) the situation of utterance (who speaks to whom? When? Where? About what?); (ii) the sociohistorical context (institutional, socio-political, positional, relational context of the documents or the participants, etc.); (iii) the textual context (genre, paratext, intertext); and (iv) if relevant, the sensorial context (images, moving images, and sound).
- B. Doing preliminary analysis: researchers should ensure that they understand what the text (or document) explicitly aims to communicate before starting to explore its implicit dimensions. For example, what event, experience, or policy is the speaker referring to? What is the main argument the speaker is trying to convey, and so on?

### *Step 3: Identifying Relevant DA Tools*

Analytical tools for DA include, for example, lexical fields, metaphors, or subject positionings. There are two main ways to identify which DA tools are relevant for one's project:

- A. Doing a literature review jointly searching for both topics related to the project and DA (e.g., “racism” AND “discourse analysis”) to see how other scholars have tackled related projects and which tools they have used to conduct their analysis.
- B. Combining “immersion” phases of reading and rereading the corpus (Gill 1997: 144), with consultation of “toolkit-style” handbooks that present available tools (Gee 2011; Balker and Ellece

2011), to define the linguistic processes that one may intuitively grasp through reading.

#### Step 4: Iterative Interpretation and Writing Up Results

- A. Interpreting: researchers use selected DA tools and the contextual elements to delve into the iterative and systematic interpretation of the corpus. For instance, while the use of the passive voice obscures agency, the effects of passivization differ depending on the context: vulnerable populations can be denied agency versus responsibility for harm can be diffused to promote reconciliation.
- B. Writing up results: this requires simultaneous mobilization of excerpts from the text, the tools used to analyze them, and the context to support each argument.

Table 5. Discourse Analysis Checklist

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1. Do you have a research question compatible with the use of discourse analysis?
  2. Do you justify why discourse analysis is the most adapted method of analysis for your research project?
  3. Have you clearly identified and defined the method(s) of discourse analysis and discourse analysis tools you are using?
  4. Do you justify how the chosen method of discourse analysis and discourse analysis tools are aligned with your research question and conceptual framework?
  5. Is the chosen method of discourse analysis aligned with the type of material and data you aim to analyze?
  6. Do you justify criteria of inclusion and exclusion and sampling strategies of your corpus?
  7. Is the corpus aligned with your case, literature review, research question, and method?
  8. Do you provide elements of contextualization about your corpus (e.g., the context of production and reception of documents) so that the reader can understand the value and role of the chosen sources in their context?
  9. Is each argument you put forward in your analysis both supported by elements of discourse you identify in your data and elements you draw from the context and literature?
  10. Do you explicitly reflect on how your position/trajjectory/socialization might have influenced your analysis and present the actions you took to address these reflexive insights?
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*Note:* Table 5 has been adapted from this webpage: <https://www.audreyalejandro.com/blog---the-methodological-artist/checklist-questionnaire-when-revising-a-research-assignmentproject>

DA provides a flexible set of tools to investigate the role that discourse plays in society. Adjustments may be required but following these four steps should provide researchers with a roadmap for adapting DA to their specific needs. The Discourse Analysis Checklist provides a series of generic questions to guide the use of DA in a research project.

### What Challenges?

Some of the challenges that come with applying DA to the study of IOs result from the method itself. Others are related to the complexities of discourse production within IOs.

First, DA requires strong theoretical, epistemological, and ontological coherence. Many theories of discourse challenge concepts of agency and intentionality, meaning that scholars must ensure that their theoretical framework aligns with their ontological and empirical claims. Implicit elements and effects of discourse may be lost on those who produce and receive them. For instance, World Bank officials may not intend to depoliticize poverty when setting up quantitative indexes and standards that reduce it to a technical issue (Louis and Maertens 2021). Claims about agency and intentionality should demonstrate awareness of these dynamics. Second, researchers are social agents who produce—and are socialized into—particular discourses: reflexivity helps account for the sociological characteristics and trajectory that lead to interpretation (see box *y*—*Reflexivity in Practice*). This means considering the extent to which one's own knowledge, experiences, and assumptions are shared by the social agents that one studies. Implicit references and connotations are not universal (e.g., what “security” means), and specific discursive elements do not make sense in all social contexts (e.g., the meaning and value of metaphors are localized).

IOs are complex settings for discourse production and circulation: clear theoretical and methodological justifications are useful when defining the scope of “IO discourses.” For example, the rationale for studying official MERCOSUR reports and web pages can be minimal, but the extent to which discourses produced by MERCOSUR employees represent “MERCOSUR discourse” needs to be demonstrated on a case-by-case basis. Similarly, identifying the authors of an “IO discourse” is challenging because of corporate and collective authorship and runs the risk of reifying the organization and concealing internal dynamics. Common characteristics in IO discourse also need to be problematized—like the taken-for-granted labelling of “local” versus “international” discourses. One helpful strategy is to learn

as much as possible about *how* different texts and documents are produced within a given IO and adjust empirical and theoretical claims accordingly. All case studies require contextualization to guard against one-size-fits-all interpretations of IO discourse as institutionalized discourses might have different meanings and effects.

### To Go Further

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