

# In praise of text analysis

An essay in honour of Margaret Berry's  
80th birthday and the 25th anniversary  
of *Functions of Language*

Elissa Asp  
Saint Mary's University

## A little context

It is an honour to be asked to address the 'why of text analysis' in celebration of Margaret Berry's 80th birthday and of the 25th anniversary of the publication of *Functions of Language*. In the spirit of Wegener's clarifications (this volume) around what 'text' is, it seems useful also to start with a little context as to what 'text analysis' is and how it is related to 'discourse analysis'. Once this context is established, I sketch broad reasons for doing 'text/discourse analyses', including a mini-review of articles published in *Functions of Language* to assess the extent to which discourse/text analyses are being used for descriptive and theoretical purposes, and close with a bit of praise for discourse/text analysis.

## What is text analysis?

First, like many linguists, I tend to use the term 'discourse analysis' rather than or at least as well as 'text analysis'. My reason for this is that my goals have to do with understanding discourse (as "the making of meaning") in general and in particular texts, and with understanding the processes of discourse production and interpretation. I use 'texts' – recorded instances of discourse activity – to do this for the reasons already specified by Wegener (this volume). However, 'discourse analysis' is also widely used in social sciences and humanities for Derridean and Foucauldian interpretive practices that focus on the (de-)construction of power relations in fields of experience and associated register conventions (as in the 'discourse of X' where 'X' is a field such as history, feminism, Marxism, racism and so on) and texts may be selectively sampled (or not) in support of

interpretations. Contrastively, while the work that linguists do when they analyse texts or discourses may be informed by or include such interpretive practices, the actual ‘analysis’ part focuses on specific texts or corpora. Moreover, the linguist’s discourse/text analysis is likely to involve ‘analysis’ of specific grammatical, lexical, and discursive features or structures that occur (or not) in the text or corpora. That is, the linguist’s discourse/text analysis is a multi-step procedure. The first steps involve identification, categorization, and coding of linguistic, and discourse phenomena in one or more texts. Subsequent steps may involve analysis of distribution, frequency, likelihood and so on of coded features. (This is of course not ‘news’ to linguists who do this sort of work, but students and scholars in other fields are often quite surprised by it.)

In the model developed by Gregory (e.g. 1984a/2002, 1988; and deVilliers & Stainton 2001, 2009 for versions of the grammars) and elaborated as a neurocognitive model for clinical discourse analysis in Asp & deVilliers (2010), these processes of discourse/text analysis encompass linguistic, discourse, and contextual analyses in word-by-word, clause-by-clause parsing and coding of semantic, morphosyntactic, phonological and phonetic (and any other media) structures, functions, and features, and extend to identification and coding of cohesive features and patterns, discourse and conversational schemas, generic structure potentials, scripts, frames, and scenarios linked to genres and generic situation types, as well as demographic characterisations of participants and ethnographic accounts of the instantial and socio-cognitive contexts in which the discourse occurs.<sup>1</sup> If the goal of an analysis is to support interpretation and understanding of the linguistic and semiotic processes at work in an instance of discourse, the optimal coding is exhaustive insofar as it makes explicit at every possible level of description the choices that have been made by participants and those aspects of the context and participants’ interactions that bear on its interpretation (see e.g. Asp & deVilliers 2010: 169–192 for models of this kind of analysis). From this, the analyst extracts patterns and exceptions either qualitatively – using, for example, heuristics such as phasal analysis as developed by Gregory and Malcolm (see e.g. Gregory 1984a/2002; Malcolm 2010)<sup>2</sup> – or by quantitative analyses of coding, or combinations of these, depending on the goals. As a final step, the analysis can be interpreted. Thus, the analytic steps differ from the interpretation insofar as the analysis produces results which are then interpreted. This situation – that inter-

---

1. I use ‘discourse/text analysis’ as a reminder that the analysis I speak of is inclusive of linguistic, discourse, and contextual features.

2. Their work on phase began in the early eighties. The sources cited here are for accessible (in print) examples.

pretation necessarily depends on the results of analyses – holds obviously for studies that include post-coding statistical analyses as part of their design. However, it is also relevant for qualitative analyses of individual texts, where understanding how the text or feature or structure works emerges from the interpretation of results arising from an analysis of some sort of descriptive coding.

Obviously, most discourse/text analyses use partial coding – focusing on a particular function, structure, selectional environment, or other aspect of the text – because they are undertaken to address specific questions or goals. Halliday and Hasan's (1976) cohesive analysis, Berry's (e.g. 1981) elaboration of exchange structures, or Martin and White's (2005) appraisal analyses are well developed approaches to the analysis of particular aspects of discourse/text. Somewhat less obviously, aspects of coding and/or analyses involve making categorical judgements and thus bits of interpretation get incorporated into analyses that derive from individual uses of analytic schemas. Moreover, the analytic schemas themselves inescapably incorporate aspects of particular theoretical perspectives: the above mentioned approaches are grounded in functional linguistics, and indeed Gregory's phasal analysis and Berry's exchange structures presuppose tri-functional grammars. That is, both individuals and the models they use for doing analyses introduce elements of variability and potential 'biases' that will influence resulting interpretations (see also Halliday 2001). Nevertheless, if the criteria for coding and analysis are explicit, discourse/text analyses should be replicable and interpretations based on them challengeable. This takes us to the very heart of the 'why' question.

### Why do discourse/text analysis?

The core or 'meta' reason for doing discourse/text analysis in this view is the 'forensic-like' one of developing an evidence base which is sufficiently comprehensive and replicable as to support 'diagnostic' or 'semiotic' judgements and interpretations about a discourse/text or sets of discourses/texts.<sup>3</sup> Such judgements and interpretations can be directed towards the discourse/text itself, aspects of its language, or, perhaps more commonly, the analyses are interpreted as signs of extra-textual conditions or purposes.

---

3. The OED cites the first use of 'semioticke' in English as that of J. Hart in 1625 who treats it as a glossing synonym for 'diagnosticke' in "the chiefe..part of Physicke diagnosticke or semioticke, which teacheth vs to know the nature, causes, and substance of the disease by the signes and grounds of the same". This seems to be exactly relevant though it is no longer the dominant sense.

## Discourse/text analysis for extra-textual purposes

Discourse/text analyses that form evidence bases for extra-textual goals include obvious examples such as forensic linguistics and clinical discourse analyses. In forensic applications analysis may be conducted to determine the source of a text in terms of ‘authorship/speaker identity’ and/or ‘authenticity/forgery’, the determination of origin of speakers and so on (see e.g. Coulthard & Johnson 2010). In clinical discourse analyses patterns of use are interpreted as indices of communicative and neurocognitive function (e.g. Asp & deVilliers 2010, in press). In these situations, discourse/text analysis may be of single instances, or of corpora of varying sizes, but the function of the discourse/text is to serve as a corpus or language sample and its analysis is only ‘about the discourse/text’ itself insofar as that sheds light on the relevant extra-textual contexts of its production. Forensic and clinical uses of discourse/text analysis impose the most robust constraints for replicability and reliability of analyses.

Arguably, many other uses of discourse/text analysis also have this ‘forensic-like’ character where the results of analyses are interpreted in relation to different aspects of context(s) and to goals that extend well beyond ‘understanding the discourse/text’. For example, critical discourse analysis (CDA) is aimed at revealing ideological underpinnings and power relations at work in our public and private discourses (e.g. Bloor & Bloor 2007); pedagogic uses of discourse/text analysis include teachers and students developing awareness of and expertise in relevant genres associated with academics and thus potentially changing educational outcomes (e.g. Berry 2013, 2016; Martin & Rose 2008); and discourse/text analyses of the myriad institutionalized forms of interactions in classrooms, courtrooms, clinics, and businesses may also alert participants to discourse/text patterns so that they can monitor and/or change them. These kinds of discourse/text analyses are potentially transformative, enabling people to become aware of and so make decisions about the semiotic processes they participate in.

## Discourse/text analysis for exegesis

Some discourse/text analyses are directed towards interpretation of the text not as ‘evidence of something else’ but as means of appreciating (or understanding) the discourse/text itself (in its context of course) and ‘how it works’. Literary or other texts where there is ‘high value’ attached to the instance are often subject to such analyses. Classic early examples are Halliday’s (1971) paper on William Golding’s *The Inheritors* where he showed that the transitivity selections actually coded the conceptual divergence between the Neanderthals and the ‘new people’

(see Simon-Vandenberg, and also Davies, this volume), and Gregory's (1986/1995) analysis of "Generic expectancies and discoursal surprises" in "The Good Morrow" which illustrates through a phasal analysis both the matches and mismatches between the genre the poem references and specific text selections which, collectively, create 'surprises'. The use of discourse/text analysis for literary interpretation may seem like a 'privileged' and perhaps unnecessary application. (Most literary scholars do not do discourse/text analysis of the sort described here to support their interpretations.) However, literary texts invite such analyses because they make the generic and habitual 'strange' (Shklovsky 1925). It is thus unsurprising that many applications and theoretical innovations developed out of such early analyses (see e.g. Miller & Turci 2010 for recent work). Indeed, the analysis of literary texts such as those from Halliday and Gregory are focused on the text (in context) in order to demonstrate a particular type of analysis for professional audiences of literary and linguistics scholars. So, the exegetical function of the analysis is actually in the service of a meta-exegesis which demonstrates not just how the texts 'work' but how to show how the texts work. These analyses too have functions 'beyond' the exegesis of linguistically realized 'art' though grounded in the traditions of the Russian formalists and European and British functionalists.

### Discourse/text analysis for linguistics and linguistic theory

To check the extent to which linguists use discourse/text analyses for theoretical and descriptive linguistic ends, I conducted a mini-review in *Functions of Language*. After an initial search for "text analysis" (in the title, abstract, or keywords) yielded limited results (nineteen articles and two reviews), a repeated search using just 'text' or 'discourse' in the title, abstract, or keywords yielded a total of sixty-seven unique articles and forty-six reviews. I reviewed the articles by title and abstract to get a sense of what they were about. (Articles could appear under more than one topic so they don't 'add up'.) About a third (twenty-five) address some aspect of grammar. Text/discourse analysis is used to explore the distribution and/or function of particular grammatical constructions, sometimes with reference to generic, register, or contextual constraints. Studies of evaluation and appraisal (sixteen) and thematic and other textual organisation (fourteen) in a variety of genres contribute to genre descriptions. Similarly, there are a few articles that describe single aspects (such as intonation, prosodies, the use of *um* and *uh*) of particular genres, dialects, or languages, including three on 'discourse markers'. There are also a couple of articles that address second language learning, three that present critical discourse analyses, and a couple that I was unable to classify.

Finally, there were nine articles that I labelled as ‘theoretical’. Topics of the theoretical papers range over multiword sequences, grammaticalization, anaphora, reference, the nature of discourse acts, putative universal functions of the right and left clause peripheries, and also include some specific discussions of alternative models of evaluation and theme. These articles indicate that text/discourse analysis and evidences do figure in theoretical discussions about language as well as about discourse in *Functions of Language*. However, there is only one article (Green 2014) (that I could identify) that theorizes ‘discourse’ in the sense described by Berry (1981:121). Berry stated there that discourse analysis had two aims. One was to be able to say something useful about individual texts and groups of texts. The second was “to work towards a theory of discourses” which would enable prediction of “the distribution of surface forms” such that only “‘grammatical’ forms of discourse” would be produced. At the time, she was writing about three part exchange structures and showed that in some contexts the third move was optional while there was one in which it was obligatory. While we may want to resist the appropriation of generative language to discourse/text analysis, the idea that theoretical accounts of discourse could be held to the same standards as other theories, and therefore capable of prediction and open to hypothesis generation and testing is still relevant.

It is notable that my search turned up no instances of the sort of exhaustive discourse/text analysis that I described above as optimal if one is aiming to find out about a new text/discourse. This absence is not surprising as such analyses, though important for gaining understanding of what is going on in a particular text or set of discourses, are descriptive exercises that are more appropriate as ‘background work’ that feeds into specific projects, or as book publications where there is space to ground explorations of semiotic phenomena in rich descriptions. This is not to belittle such descriptive work and certainly not to relegate it to some realm of ‘unscientific activity’. Description is essential for finding out about languages and discourses and how they work, in that it provides the contexts for theorizing both language and discourse functions. Nevertheless, it does not fit easily into journals where genre expectations do not generally include ‘descriptions’ of discourse/text unless brief and in the service of some other argument or discussion.

### **Why ‘praise’ discourse/text analysis?**

The actual activity of doing discourse/text analysis can aid interpretation. One notices, as the coding and analysis proceeds, patterns and exceptions that might otherwise elude observation in a close reading that lacks the explicitness and systematicity of a discourse/text analysis. This can be important not only in the rar-

efied environments of literary interpretation, but also in more overtly ‘forensic’ settings such as the clinic, the police station, courtroom, or the political podium. This noticing sometimes elicits specific ‘aha!’ phenomena – the surprised satisfaction associated with pattern recognition, or with hatching a hypothesis about a discourse/text and/or its language. Discourse/text analysis is ‘semiotic’ or diagnostic in all contexts. It is not the only resource in the linguist’s toolkit, but it is amongst the most useful in developing evidence to help us understand language, its functions, and the things we do with it. In a world where ‘alternative facts’ flourish in public, evidence is always welcome. What’s not to ‘praise’?

## References

- Asp, Elissa & Jessica deVilliers. 2010. *When language breaks down: Analysing discourse in clinical contexts*. Cambridge: CUP. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511845352>
- Asp, Elissa & Jessica deVilliers. In press. Clinical Linguistics. In Wendy Bowcher, Lise Fontaine & David Schönthal (eds.), *The Cambridge handbook of Systemic-Functional linguistics*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Berry, Margaret. 1981a. Systemic linguistics and discourse analysis: A multi-layered approach to exchange structure. In Malcolm Coulthard & Martin Montgomery (eds.), *Studies in discourse analysis*, 120–145. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Berry, Margaret. 2013. Towards a study of the differences between formal written English and informal spoken English. In Lisa Fontaine, Tom Bartlett & Gerard O’Grady (eds.), *Systemic Functional Linguistics: Exploring choice*, 365–383. Cambridge: CUP. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139583077.022>
- Berry, Margaret. 2016. On describing contexts of situation. In Wendy Bowcher & Jennifer Liang (eds.), *Society in language, language in society: Essays in honour of Ruqaiya Hasan*, 184–205. London: Palgrave MacMillan. [https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137402868\\_8](https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137402868_8)
- Bloor, Meriel & Thomas Bloor. 2007. *The practice of critical discourse analysis: An introduction*. London: Arnold.
- Coulthard, Malcolm & Alison Johnson (eds.). 2010. *The Routledge handbook of forensic linguistics*. London: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203855607>
- deVilliers, Jessica & Robert Stainton (eds.). 2001. *Communication in linguistics*. Vol. 1. Papers in Honour of Michael Gregory. Toronto: Éditions du Gref.
- deVilliers, Jessica & Robert Stainton (eds.). 2009. *Communication in Linguistics*. Vol. 2. *Michael Gregory’s proposals for a communication linguistics*. Toronto: Éditions du Gref.
- Green, Clarence. 2014. On the relationship between clause combination, grammatical hierarchy and discourse-pragmatic coherence. *Functions of Language* 21(3). 297–332. <https://doi.org/10.1075/fof.21.3.02gre>
- Gregory, Michael. 1988. Generic situation and register: A functional view of communication. In James D. Benson, Michael J. Cummings & William S. Greaves (eds.), *Linguistics in a systemic perspective*, 301–329. Amsterdam: Benjamins. <https://doi.org/10.1075/cilt.39.12gre>
- Gregory, Michael. 1986/1995. Generic expectancies and discursual surprises: John Donne’s *The Good Morrow*. In Peter H. Fries & Michael Gregory (eds.), *Discourse in society: Systemic-functional perspectives*, 67–84. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

- Gregory, Michael. 1984a/2002. Phasal analysis with communication linguistics: Two contrastive discourses. In Peter H. Fries, Michael J. Cummings, David Lockwood & William Spruiell (eds.), *Relations and functions within and around language*, 316–345. London: Continuum.
- Halliday, M. A. K. 1971. Linguistic function and literary style: An enquiry into the language of William Golding's *The Inheritors*. In Seymour Chatman (ed.), *Literary style: A symposium*. Oxford: OUP.
- Halliday, M. A. K. 2001. Is the grammar neutral? Is the grammarian neutral? In deVilliers & Stainton, 2001, 179–203.
- Malcolm, Karen. 2010. *Phasal analysis: Analysing discourse through communication linguistics*. London: Continuum.
- Martin, J. R. & David Rose. 2008. *Genre relations: Mapping culture*. London: Equinox.
- Miller, Donna R. & Monica Turci (eds.). 2010. *Language and verbal art revisited: Linguistic approaches to the study of literature*. Sheffield: Equinox.
- Shklovsky, Viktor. 1925. Art as Technique. In Alexandra Berlina, 2017, *Victor Shklovsky: A reader*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury.

## Address for correspondence

Elissa Asp  
English Department and Linguistics Program  
Saint Mary's University  
Halifax, NS  
B3H 3C3  
Canada  
elissa.asp@smu.ca