

BOOK REVIEW
A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO DISCOURSE ANALYSIS
WRITTEN BY:
SEAN SUTHERLAND, UNIVERSITY OF WESTMINSTER, UK
PUBLISHED IN 2016 BY RED GLOBE PRESS, UK

Saqib Javed

M.Phil (Applied Linguistics), Minhaj University, Lahore, Pakistan

1. Introduction

Hajier (1995) defines discourse as “a specific ensemble of ideas, concepts and categorizations that is produced, reproduced and transformed in a particular set of practices and through which meaning is given to physical and social realities” (p,42). Taylor (2013) states that “Discourse analysis explores the idea of how meaning is socially constructed and how talk and text can be interpreted in social settings” (p. 128). Discourse analysis as stated by McCarthy (2019) is “the analysis of language in its social context” (p.55). He further points out that discourse analysts are interested in both spoken discourse and written discourse. Discourse analysis is an applied area of linguistics that enables applied linguists to analyze and understand real language data.

The book under critical review is titled "A Beginner's Guide to Discourse Analysis" written by Sean Sutherland, and is actually meant for those learners who are new in the field of discourse analysis and for those also who want to get a clear and practical understanding of how language is a source of meaning- making and functions in communication. The book can be said an introductory text for the readers who want to study how language is actually used in society for communication purpose, how meaning is conveyed in the context and what parameters make communication successful. Sutherland explores different aspects of discourse analysis, detailing how language functions in context and how people construct meaning and interpret meaning in both textual and conversational discourse. The author, Sutherland breaks down complex ideas and theories and methodologies about discourse analysis into digestible sub-parts, making the book easy and worth-reading. Along with this, the book also provides a brief study of other related sociolinguistic variables that affect language use, like register, cohesion ad coherence, discourse markers and Grice's maxims. As discourse analysis is an interdisciplinary branch of study, this book also throws light on other related disciplines like communication studies, sociology, anthropology, management and psychology.

2. Theme/central idea

The book “A Beginner's Guide to Discourse Analysis” is the first of its unique kind which discusses in detail the concept of discourse analysis which means the study of language in use. Sea Sutherland argues that isolated words are not enough to convey meanings; rather, to make meanings, we take into account the whole context in which the speaker is talking i.e. who is talking to whom, where and for what purpose. So, language, either written or spoken, can only be analyzed in the context or speech event in which it is spoken. People use language in many different contexts and a proper understanding of those contexts is necessary for the listeners to understand the language and comprehend the message. This is discourse analysis. Individual words, phrases and clauses have meaning of their own, but they can only be understood by looking at their co-text, the words that surrounds them and at their context, the real world situations in which the words are used. In discourse analysis, we learn how to make meaning from text in which not everything that is meant is actually spoken aloud or written down.

Furthermore, discourse is the study of words not in isolated form, but in the context. Discourse looks at language above sentence level.

3. About the author

Sean Sutherland is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of English, Linguistics and Cultural Studies at the University of Westminster, UK, and is known for his contributions to the field of discourse analysis, particularly through his accessible and insightful writing. As the author of "A Beginner's Theory of Discourse Analysis," Sutherland is known as a key figure in demystifying complex theoretical concepts for newcomers. With a background in linguistics and communication studies, he uses an engaging writing style to make discourse analysis simple, approachable and practical. He is famous for his ability to break down complex theoretical ideas of discourse analysis into understandable segments, bridging the gap between theoretical depth and practical application for studies and general readers.



4. Summary

The book consists of five chapters and each chapter builds on the previous one. Chapter 1 is introductory in nature. Sutherland begins by defining discourse analysis and its relevance to various fields such as sociology, linguistics, and communication studies. He discusses the basic concepts like cohesion, text, reference, comparative reference, clauses, substitution, ellipsis, conjunctions, lexical cohesion, the meaning and importance of cohesion, conversation and turn completion – all are basic concepts to understand the concept different aspects of discourse analysis. Chapter two delves a bit deeper in to concept of discourse analysis from various perspectives and discusses other related concepts to discourse analysis, like the difference between text ad discourse, what actually is included in text, the ideational metafunction, the six processes, the concept of schema and propositional meaning and explores how listeners make sense in conversation. Chapter 3 throws light on sociolinguistics and language variation according to user, and describes various kinds of variations, namely phonological, lexical, and grammatical variation. It also explores how language constructs identity and the concept of interpersonal metafunction and the relevant concept of stance in conversation. Chapter 4 delves deep into concepts like active voice and passive voice, their use and importance, concept of register and slangs in language, and a detailed discussion on field, tenor and mode in communication. In the end, the writer compares the register with genre. In the last chapter, the writer discusses the textual metafunction of language, detailing us various themes i.e. marked and unmarked ones, the concept of declarative, interrogative ad imperative clauses and patterns of organization the text, how thematic development takes place in written text ad distinction among topical, textual and interpersonal themes. The very important concept of discourse markers and its kinds which makes communication understandable is also part of this last chapter. Sutherland also presents case studies that demonstrate how discourse analysis can uncover hidden meanings and power dynamics in various forms of communication. The

last chapter closes with the concepts of implicature and Grice's maxim and final thoughts from the author on the subject.

5. Critical Analysis

The book provides step-by-step guide on how to understand discourse analyses with examples and exercises that help readers apply the concepts in practical scenarios. Sutherland's emphasis on practical application makes this book particularly valuable for beginners. One of the most commendable features of the book is its accessibility. Sutherland writes in a straightforward and engaging manner, avoiding overly technical jargon that might disturb beginners. He is so straightforward in his description that he keeps the readers involved and explains complex concepts with the help of examples in a simple and understandable way. This gives a unique quality to his reading material.

Secondly, the writer's practical approach makes this book stand out from other theoretical texts on discourse analysis. He does not allude the readers with abstract concepts, rather, he provides practical tools and methods for analyzing discourse. It becomes easier and particularly beneficial for students who wish to apply discourse analysis in their academic or professional work. The inclusion of relevant examples helps in understanding key concepts effectively. Essential aspects of discourse analysis, including, coherence cohesion, Grice's maxims, implicature, and discourse markers have been presented briefly and lucidly. Sutherland's discussion on the importance of cultural context in communication is worth reading.

Thirdly, the writer uses real world examples to make his point of view clear and lucid. He uses everyday situations and anecdotes to convey his point of view to develop the interest of the readers. This helps the readers understand the content by going into practical examples. The inclusion of practical examples and exercises helps readers grasping the concepts and apply the theoretical concepts and methodologies in real-world contexts. This hands-on approach further enhances learning and retention. The flow of ideas is logical, argumentative and systematic. Invariably, the ideas and concepts flow naturally from simple to complex to give an easy understanding of the subject. Readers get the whole story of knowledge and understanding combined with acquiring skills on the topic and skill to make their own analysis. This practical approach reinforces learning and aids in the development of analytical skills also. This clarity of the topic and easy accessibility do not let the readers go to some other source to find out simple concepts, as the book covers the whole range of concepts fully. This clear and accessible style of writing is unique quality of the writer.

Fourthly, the book covers a wide range of topics within discourse analysis, providing a solid ground for further study. It balances theoretical explanations with practical applications, offering a holistic view of the field. The writer makes his point of view clear on how discourse analysis is related to semantics, pragmatics, sociology, psychology and anthropology. He covers a wide range of influential figures such as Michel Foucault and Erving Goffman, with their expertise on the subject by offering insights into how their theories have shaped the field. This theoretical grounding has further been supported logically and argumentatively by discussions on how these theories can be applied in real-world contexts. Moreover, Sutherland provides a range of analytical tools and techniques, from conversation analysis to critical discourse analysis. He gives importance to the need of context in interpreting discourse. He guides readers by giving practical steps for conducting their own analyses. The book has exercises and case studies also, which are particularly useful for learners to apply theoretical concepts in practical scenarios.

Fifthly, the style of the writer is everything that gives him a unique quality. It is well said that style is the man and you are what you write. Sutherland's writing is clear and engaging, making complex ideas more digestible for beginners. Sutherland hardly makes use of jargons and any technical vocabulary and where technical terms are necessary, they are well-defined,

relevant and well – explained by real life examples. The book is also well-structured, with each chapter building on the previous one, leading to a coherent understanding of discourse analysis for the beginners and for those who want to refresh basic concepts for digging deeper into the subject. This engaging writing style moves and motivates the readers a lot and encourages those who don't have any prior knowledge on the subject to grasp the concepts so easily with examples.

Despite the book's many strengths, there are some significant areas where the writer falls short. First of all, the opening chapter is very much comprehensive and lucid. But the concepts of text and non text still remains unclear for the beginners, as there are no examples for the beginners to elucidate the difference between text and non text and further in text and discourse. It should have been supplemented with practical examples. The concept of coherence and cohesion is limited, as the readers do not get the whole idea due to lack of examples. The concepts of coherence and cohesion which play key role in understanding discourse analysis have been discussed on the surface level, on the surface, and are not further elaborated with the help of real life examples.

Secondly, some chapters may be too concise, leaving readers wanting more in-depth analysis. Chapters containing the concepts of metafunctions should have been with practical examples and exercises to grab the full idea practically. This is because metafunctions are relevant to all kinds of text in which we come to know the actual purpose of the text, what are the ideas behind the text, the choice of words or diction etc. there is a lack of informal spoken conversations in the book which provide real life examples on discourse analysis. The texts for practice are taken from invented text only and important speech events have not been considered important for examples for beginners.

Thirdly, oversimplification is also found in describing some concepts. The writer considers his audience already knows the concepts and he oversimplifies some concepts. In chapter 4 of the book, the difference between text and genre has not been described for the beginners with examples. Similarly, the concept of text and co text has been less elaborated by the writer. In the same chapter 4, the concepts of field, tenor and mood are not followed by some more examples and seem in a detached form from discourse analysis. In chapter 5, the concept of marked and unmarked themes has not been fully elaborated for the readers. The concept of discourse markers and its importance is not fully elaborated with the help of some practical exercises followed by some possible solutions for the readers.

Fourthly, the book's narrow focus on specific aspects of discourse analysis (e.g., Critical Discourse Analysis) might limit its usefulness for readers seeking a more comprehensive introduction to the field. Due to lack of details of Michel Foucault and other prominent writers, the domain of CDA is not well explained. The reference to other writers is missing. The model of Norman Fairclough is missing as far as the concept of discourse analysis goes. Many topics on discourse have been discussed as surface study, without giving comprehensive details and deeper insights into the subject. For example the theoretical description of metafunctions in language is there, but its practical application is missing due to absence of follow up exercises. So, the readers still wait for broader viewpoint with real life application of those metafunctions on the part of the writers.

Fifthly, the book does not provide sufficient discussion on the theoretical foundations underlying discourse analysis, making it challenging for readers to understand the context and implications of the analytical approaches presented. The contributions from Michel Foucault and Norman Fairclough are missing in the book, which provide background information and are necessary for grasping theoretical foundations to discourse analysis. This limited use of examples and case studies makes it difficult for readers to see how discourse analysis is applied in practice. Even if Sutherland provides some examples, they are often too brief or

oversimplified, leaving the readers demanding more concrete illustrations of how discourse analysis works in real-world contexts. Moreover, Grice's maxims need further elaboration, since its practical application in real day world is missing. This would provide readers a deeper understanding and potential benefit to the topic which results in conceptual clarity. Furthermore, theories from Western scholars dominate the overall conceptualization and details of discourse analysis and this may results in global applicability of the theories and worth of the book. Although the writer gives details of cultural thought patterns in the book, a more elaborated inclusion of Western perspective could provide the readers with a global understanding and applicability beyond regional context.

The last but not the least drawback of the book is the absence of visual aids, like diagrams or flowcharts which make overall learning productive and interesting. Visual impact of the book always matters a lot. It could better help the new learners in grasping the relationship of different elements of discourse analysis and engaging the readers on the topic, giving them proper understanding of the topic with a long lasting impact in their minds. One of the limitations of the book is that it discusses only English discourse which may limit its global focus ad applicability to non English contexts. The book should have been written keeping in mind the global audience including examples from other languages ad contexts to enhance its universality. In the end, the scholars seeking a deeper understanding on discourse analysis and other professionals may find a lack of interest in the book because the book has been written keeping I mind the targeted audience who are beginners, and experienced readers may think of the book too basic.

6. Recommendations

This book is basically meant for the beginners and can be read as a starting point. Though the book covers a broad range of topics in discourse analysis, it is useful and enjoyable only if the readers have some background knowledge of discourse analysis. The book is said to be a beginners' guide and deals with basics of discourse analysis. If the readers want to explore and dig the subject deeper, they may need additional resources like academic articles, online courses or other books on the topic to grasp the maximum understanding of the topic and conceptual clarity with examples from a wider perspective and more in-depth coverage of specific topics in discourse analysis. The concise summaries and examples from the book can be useful for quick reference or as a starter for more in-depth study.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, "A Beginner's Guide to Discourse Analysis" by Sean Sutherland is an excellent introductory text that successfully demystifies the complexities of discourse analysis. Written in simple ad lucid style, it has clarity, practical orientation, and engaging examples for those who are starting their study in discourse analysis. While the book may not delve deeply into every topic, it provides a solid foundation to those students who are looking for understanding the basics of discourse analysis ad want to explore how meanings are constructed ad conveyed by speakers and how language functions in communication. The book, as noted by Fadhilah et. al (2024), "discusses the basic concepts of discourse, being the core area of linguistic inquiry that plays a crucial role in understanding how language functions." The book serves as a basic reading to clarify, "the fundamental structure of a discourse, the foundation of discourse markers, discussing essential components such as coherence and cohesion" (Divany et. al. 2024). It is useful as a resource or introductory text for those who are new to the field of discourse analysis, as it offers a comprehensive introduction to key concepts, methodologies, and applications with so many real-life examples. Nowhere can we find a better conceptual clarity of discourse alongwith clear conceptual domains attached to it, being ideational, textual and interpersonal metafunctions of language which serve as a core domain to understand discourse analysis and systemic functional linguistics (SFL) which further explores how

language has three important layers of meaning. Sutherland's practical approach, along with his clear explanations with examples from real life scenarios, makes this book an excellent starting point for students and professionals alike.

References

- Aliti, A. (2024). Exploring the Role of Syntax in Language Comprehension and Production. *International Scientific Journal Monte (ISJM)*, 9(2).
- Divany, A., Sihotang, Z.S., Tambunan, R.L., Zahara, K., Ismahani, S., Fadhillah, Y.,... Hafiz, M. (2024). Sentence Analysis In Syntax. *Journal Pendelikon Tambusai*, 8(1), 2032-2037
- Hajer, M.A. Discourse analysis. In *The Politics of Environmental Discourse. Ecological Modernization and the Policy process*; Clarendon Press: Oxford, UK, 1995; pp. 42–72. [[Google Scholar](#)]
- McCarthy, M., Christian, M., & Slade, D. (2019). Discourse analysis. In *An introduction to applied linguistics* (pp. 55-71). Routledge.
- Matchin, W & Hickok, G (2019), 'The Cortical Organization of Syntax', *Cerebral Cortex*, vol. 30, no. 3, pp. 1481–1498.
- Morvay, G. (2012), 'The relationship between syntactic knowledge and reading comprehension in EFL learners', *Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching*, vol. 2, no. 3, p. 415.
- Späth, P. (2012). Understanding the social dynamics of energy regions—the importance of discourse analysis. *Sustainability*, 4(6), 1256-1273.
- Sutherland, S. (2016), *A beginners' guide to discourse analysis*, Red Globe Press, UK.
- Taylor, S. (2013). *What is discourse analysis?* Bloomsbury Academic.