



James Paul Gee

an introduction to

# Discourse Analysis

Theory and Method



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# An Introduction to Discourse Analysis

“If you only read one book on discourse analysis, this is the one to read. If you’re a specialist, you’ll find much to enjoy here as well. Gee’s book shows us that discourse analysis is about a lot more than linguistic study; it will help us all to see how to keep from, as he says, ‘getting physically, socially, culturally, or morally “bitten” by the world’.”

Ron Scollon, *Georgetown University, USA*

James Paul Gee presents here his unique, integrated approach to discourse analysis: the analysis of spoken and written language as it is used to enact social and cultural perspectives and identities.

Assuming no prior knowledge of linguistics, James Paul Gee presents both a theory of language-in-use, as well as a method of research. This method is made up of a set of “tools of inquiry” and strategies for using them.

Clearly structured and written in a highly accessible style, the book presents these tools of inquiry alongside the theory of language-in-use. They are then placed in the framework of an overall approach to discourse analysis. Finally, an extended example of discourse analysis is presented using some of the tools and strategies developed earlier in the book.

Perspectives from a variety of approaches and disciplines – including applied linguistics, education, psychology, anthropology, and communication – are incorporated to help students and scholars from a range of backgrounds formulate their own views on discourse and engage in their own discourse analyses.

**James Paul Gee** is the Tashia Morgridge Professor of Reading at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. His previous publications include *School Linguistics and Literacies*, *The Social Mind* and *The New Work Order* (with Glynda Hull and Colin Lankshear).



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Theory and Method

**James Paul Gee**



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# Acknowledgments

The viewpoint on language in this book has evolved over a good many years. It arose, initially, not out of any desire to contribute to discourse analysis as a method of inquiry, but rather, out of my own attempts to understand how language works in a fully integrated way as simultaneously a mental, social, cultural, institutional, and political phenomenon. I first became interested in these matters when I was teaching linguistics in the School of Language and Communication at Hampshire College in Amherst, Massachusetts. When I moved to the Applied Psycholinguistics Program at Boston University, I became interested in how such an integrated understanding of language could be applied to problems in society, especially to problems in education. It was while I was in Boston that I first met Courtney Cazden, Sarah Michaels, Eliot Mishler, Cathy O'Connor, and Dennis Wolf, colleagues who worked at other institutions, but whose work and viewpoints have deeply influenced my own ever since. When I joined the linguistics department at the University of Southern California, I had the great good fortune to work with a set of colleagues in the department who profoundly advanced my education. I am grateful, too, to Elaine Andersen and Ed Finegan for advice and encouragement in my years at USC and thereafter. Moving from USC to the Hiatt Center for Urban Education at Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts allowed me to rejoin Sarah Michaels, founder of the Hiatt Center, both as a colleague and co-researcher, and to have the privilege of working with Jim Wertsch before he departed to head the Education Department at Washington University in St. Louis. Coming to the University of Wisconsin at Madison has continued my great good fortune of inheriting wonderful colleagues. Michael Apple, Deborah Brandt, Ann DeVaney, Ceci Ford, Mary-Louise Gomez, Gloria Ladson-Billings, Rich Lehrer, Marty Nystrand, Leona Schauble, and Tom Popkewitz, in particular, have made me feel welcome and have influenced my work on this book here in Madison.

I have been blessed over the years with being able to work with a number of inspiring friends and colleagues in Australia, Canada, England, New Zealand, and the United States. I will not name names for fear I might inadvertently leave someone



out. But, perhaps ironically, as an “isolate” in academics, I all the more treasure the friendship and support my colleagues, at a variety of institutions, have shown me.

I must thank David Bloome, for a very insightful and helpful review of an earlier draft of this manuscript, as well as one of his graduate students, Sheila Otto, who helpfully reviewed the original manuscript from the point of view of a student. Another, but anonymous, reviewer from Routledge, also offered quite helpful suggestions for revision. I have to thank David Barton for helping me to “place” this book in the first place, as well as for very useful feedback. Judith Green collaborated with me on a project at a time and in a way that helped me to clarify my views on a variety of issues.

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# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Language as action and affiliation

In a moment, I will issue a “truth in lending” statement about what this book is and is not meant to do. But first, let me say something about the viewpoint on language that I will take in this book. Many people, including many linguists, think that the primary purpose of human language is to “communicate information.” In fact, I believe this is simply a prejudice on the part of academics who believe, often falsely, that what they themselves primarily do to and with each other is “exchange information.” Language, in fact, serves a great many functions and “giving and getting information,” yes, even in our new “Information Age,” is but one, and, by no means, the only one.

If I had to single out a primary function of human language, it would be not one, but the following two: to scaffold the performance of social activities (whether play or work or both) and to scaffold human affiliation within cultures and social groups and institutions.

These two functions are connected. Cultures, social groups, and institutions shape social activities: there are no activities like “water-cooler gossip sessions” or “corridor politics” without an institution whose water cooler, social relations, corridors, and politics are the sites of and rationale for these activities. At the same time though, cultures, social groups, and institutions get produced, reproduced, and transformed through human activities. There is no institution unless it is enacted and reenacted moment-by-moment in activities like water-cooler gossip sessions, corridor politics, meetings, and numerous other sorts of social interactions, all of which partly (but only partly) have a life all of their own apart from larger cultural and institutional forces.

This book is concerned with a theory and a method for studying how the details of language get recruited, “on site,” to “pull off” specific social activities and social identities (“memberships” in various social groups, cultures, and institutions). In the process, we will see that language-in-use is everywhere and always “political.”