

From: Bonnie Urciuoli, *Discourse, culture and social structure: some basics*  
normal, natural-- or, as I put it above, *unmarked*. Yet however people may think of social facts as natural, right, normal, or unmarked, they are shaped by the power structures that organize a society both economically and politically, and they carry much more symbolic capital. Having normative linguistic capital (knowing how to use language and discourse in certain ways) not only reinforces people's position in the system, it also reinforces the way that the whole hegemonic principle works. In this course we will examine the development of an American hegemonic sense of the race/class intersection. We will examine how people's very *structures of feeling* (another of Williams' terms)-- how people feel or react or evaluate-- are not simply individual opinions but are shaped by these structures.

### **Discourse Analysis: How to approach it at the nitty-gritty level**

To summarize, then, cultural and symbolic capital-- the value and prestige accorded to what people do-- does not come out of a social vacuum. Hegemonic assumptions (ways of being, acting and thinking that are "naturally" good and right) are tangibly grounded in the institutions that organize people's lives; hence they are culture specific. Hegemonic assumptions are unspoken, often unarticulated, and seem obvious, common-sense. At the same time, people do consciously articulate ideologies, as statements about what is and should be. There is a kind of continuum from what people take for granted as normal and right without explicitly stating, to the ideological formulae that you hear over and over again in the public discourses of a society. Discourse analysis provides techniques for getting at these cultural assumptions.

Discourse is much more than words per se. Words only turn up in sentences that are actually said or written by particular people in particular times and places. In fact, people never just say things, they say things to others, to a reader or listener or viewer. Sometimes this addressee (receiver) is specific and real, sometimes potential and imagined. So there is a *relationship* between whoever sends the message and whoever receives it. As you look at a bit of discourse, always ask yourself, what shapes the relationship between sender and addressee? How is it part of a larger network of relationships? These relations are located in a *cultural frame*: that is, a set of notions about what matters as real, what defines people as having worth in their society. And these notions, this cultural frame, is kept alive by a society's institutions. The U.S. has its own distinct cultural frames, its own ideas about what is real and worthwhile-- that is, there really is an "American culture." Some of these notions are specific to the U.S., other notions are shared with other contemporary societies as what we might call the culture of modernism. One central notion that we will explore is the idea that there is a definingly American person, characterized by self-control, the desire to better one's circumstances and ability to understand what democracy is all about and participate in it effectively. Until maybe 70 (but I'd say more like 50) years ago, this type was racialized as generally white and specifically Anglo-Saxon. Horsman, Jacobson and Gould all talk about this and you will see it in writings on the "science" of race and in immigration law. By around 40 years ago, the racialized aspects of this type started to partly fade and partly get displaced from biology onto social behavior, so that the mechanisms of social mobility, especially education, become critical in constructing the ideal American. (Hence the equation of class mobility with "acting white").

Discourse analysis techniques start with the analysis of the communicative events: the people involved, the larger setting, what they actually say or write (form) as well as semantic

content (reference), what motivates them, what their goals are, what code (language, dialect or register) they use, what channel they use (written, spoken, signed, e-mailed, etc). Each of these is an element of the communicative event (as you may remember from Language and Culture, or from Ethnography of Communication). Moreover, meaning in the communicative event (or, to be fancy, discursive meaning-- meaning in discourse) is about much more than what words refer to. We can distinguish six different communicative functions (social actions), depending on what communicative element is focused on. For example:

<b>If the focus is on:</b>	<b>The function (how you interpret it) is:</b>
speaker	expressive, how the speaker thinks or feels
addressee/audience	directive, the speaker's effect on listeners
topic, information	referential, the literal meaning
form, phrasing	stylistic, poetic or rhetorical effect
channel	phatic, simply the maintenance of contact
code	metalinguistic, explaining meaning

All these functions are going on at the same time and reinforcing each other. How can you sort this out so you can analyze some of the discourse we'll be looking at? Here are some examples of how the speaker, the addressee or audience, the information and the form or phrasing can all be interdependent:

**Speaker, addressee/audience, information.** Look for the social conditions that establish the speaker's relation to the addressee or audience and that make it possible for the speaker to successfully express attitudes, feelings or authority (expressive function), and for the addressee/audience to be persuaded or moved to action (directive function). This often means looking at how the institution works. For example, can just anyone write science or make a law? No, you have to have credentials as an academic or legislator. Credentials mean that the product will be treated as real, and so assures their social facticity because credentials privilege the referential function. As you read, for example, about racial traits of northern vs southern Italians in the Dillingham Commission report or, more outrageously, Madison Grant on the invasive non-Nordics, you may find yourself thinking, "People *believed* this??" Well, yes, plenty did, because (a) those views were hegemonically unmarked and (b) their authors had the right credentials. Their credentials and the social climate made up "felicity conditions" (the conditions that made their linguistic functions work the way they wanted). Their statements stayed "fact" until the social climate changed.

**Topic and form.** What people accept as valid information (referential function) depends in part on how things are phrased (rhetorical or stylistic function). Again, take the examples I gave in the previous paragraph or, even better, the 1964 Congressional hearings regarding immigration quota laws. In each case, the **form**, the phrasing (or rhetorical structure) has a critical effect on how listeners or readers understand the information. Sometimes the combination of reference and form is crucial in winning a political or legal argument: the arguments that "won" the 1964 hearings were those that fit the way Americans had come to think about citizenship after World War II.

As you start doing this kind of analysis, everything will seem like a jumbled mass. But

there are stylistic patterns in the way people select and shape what they say. Here are some phrasing devices you should look for.

**1. Selective reference.** People can be selective in what they refer to, and it is often instructive to contrast different perspectives on the same thing. Horsman gives examples of two quite different perspectives, and ways of referring to, American Indians in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. The pro- and anti-quota testimony at the 1964 Congressional hearings have two quite different ways of talking about immigrants, the pro-quota people talking about immigrants en masse and anti-quota people talking about immigrants as individuals. In the late 19th and early 20th century World's Fairs, non-western people are exhibited so as to highlight racial and cultural differences that make them not fit a nation-state model. By contrast, the 1964 Fair tends to show difference as folk-culture that does fit a nation-state model.

**2. Comparisons, tropes, metaphors.** These can be pretty subtle. Speakers/authors may explicitly or (more likely) implicitly compare what they are talking about to something else. In much writing about race, you'll notice that non-Anglo-Saxon people are written about as an invading horde, as out of control, as a drain on the nation-- that is, a lot of comparison with scary non-human activity. Anthropologist Phyllis Chock and anthropological linguist Ana Celia Zentella have both noted how contemporary discourses treat Hispanics/Latinos as an invasive horde.

**3. Use of word classes (nouns, adjectives, verbs, numbers, articles) and grammatical categories (singular/plural)** that makes the intangible tangible, giving definition and reality to an otherwise formless or messy set of ideas. Nineteenth century writers on "racial science" treated the "stuff" of race as something that could be measured genealogically. For over a century, intelligence has been treated as something that comes in countable units. Census categories assume clear-cut classifications. But classifications have changed a lot over the last 200 years and never really fit the complicated, messy and sometimes contradictory identification processes that people really experience.

**4. Deixis:** who are *we*, who are *you*, who are *they*? How are these alignments and contrasts made clear? You'll see this in everything we read-- especially vividly in Congressional hearings, which are, of course, all about defining "our" nation.

**5. Use of judgmental or morally imperative terms,** such as *should*. Lots of "shoulds" in those Congressional hearing transcripts.

**6. Syntactic/semantic devices that connect or classify.** Look for cause and effect statements that treat complicated human beings and their concerns and relations as almost mechanized actions analyzed them linearly: X makes Y happen. There's a lot of this in the writing on intelligence and race. Pay careful attention to cause-and-effect rhetoric, which is much more likely to be based on cultural assumptions than on actual researched data. Look for ways in which qualities or things that aren't really comparable get talked about as if they were.

This was a dense little essay and I do not expect all of you to understand all of it at first sight. I give it to you now, at the beginning of the course, so you can get a sense of what the

course is about and where we are going. Also, these are terms and ideas that I will often refer to, and I want you to have a handy little explanatory essay that provides you with definitions and explanations that you can keep referring to as you need to. So don't just read this and toss it; keep referring back to it as the class goes on. And as soon as you feel confused, PLEASE, let me know and we can sit down and talk things through and clear them up.

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