

Laura Alba 2009: *Perspectives on Discourse Analysis: Theory and Practice*. Newcastle Upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars. x + 409pp. ISBN 978-1-4438-0597-1

Noa Talaván Zanón
Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia
ntalavan@flog.uned.es

The description of discourse analysis (henceforth DA) can be viewed as a challenging enterprise, given the variety of approaches that this field encompasses. However, the approach taken in *Perspectives on Discourse Analysis* has managed to overcome this difficulty by presenting a thorough overview of most of the different aspects and approaches involved in this discipline. This type of proposal turns the present volume into a very practical resource from the point of view of students and scholars wanting to learn or review all the possible aspects involved in DA.

The organization of the book is well suited to didactic purposes, given that each chapter starts with an outline, moves from general to specific headings, ends up with a summary of the main aspects, and provides, not only self-evaluation questions and specific practice related to the contents described, but also suggestions for further reading and a list of useful websites on the corresponding subject matter examined. It is clearly a book for university students. In fact, as the author acknowledges in the introduction, this volume is a completely revised version of a previous book published in 2005 by Alba herself and entitled *Discourse Analysis for University Students*. However, this updated version can also serve as a general guide for scholars who want to learn more about DA, or even check particular aspects of some of the approaches that are included in this vast field.

After stating the main objectives of the book (i.e. to identify the different approaches to DA, to learn to carry out analyses of different texts and apply the DA tools in a practical way), the book offers twelve chapters moving from broader to more specific perspectives. The first two chapters are in fact rather general. Chapter 1, 'Introduction to Discourse Analysis', outlines the organization of the book, discusses the categories of definitions for discourse and explains the basics of Text Linguistics and DA. It should be noted that the author is careful to distinguish between formal and functional approaches; in contrast to other types of linguistic trends, the focus of DA is on what people do with language, that is, on "the use of language in context" (16), and not on the formal relationships between language constituents. In the same general line, chapter 2 (entitled 'The Data') introduces Corpus Linguistics, describing the main methods of data collection, surveying sources of data typically used for investigations of DA and discussing transcription conventions and ways of selecting appropriate samples of discourse for specific research.

The first part of the book, after the two introductory chapters described above, is dedicated to the mainstream approaches to DA. Chapter 3 presents 'Pragmatics', described as a division of DA, with special attention to Grice's (1975) ideas; it contains a practical introduction to Speech Act Theory and to the concepts of implicature, deixis,

reference and presupposition. Chapter 4 deals with 'Interactional Sociolinguistics', providing examples of analysis, and presenting the theories of Gumperz (1982) and Goffman (1959); it also devotes special attention to Brown and Levinson's (1987) Theory of Politeness, which is thoroughly described from various angles. Chapter 5 focuses on 'Conversation Analysis' (presented as one of the most practical approaches to DA), by explaining its central concepts: turn-taking, adjacency pairs, preference organization and other sequences. The author centers her discussion on the contributions of Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974), and stresses that "the core of Conversation Analysis is the exploration of sequential structures of social action" (112). The focus of Chapter 6 is 'Ethnography of Communication', which delves into Hymes' (1970) contributions in general, together with his concepts of Communicative Competence and the SPEAKING grid, and emphasizes the interdisciplinary nature and the multiple research possibilities of this ethnographic approach. Chapter 7 begins with a discussion of Labov's (1972) Variation Analysis, which explains the phenomenon of linguistic change (including an outline of the main techniques of data collection and analysis), before taking the reader into the exposition of 'Narrative Analysis'; this chapter also leads to considerations of social and cultural identity, as well as to the concept of narrative voice. It concludes that narrative analysis can provide "the answers to many questions about the construction of local and global identities" (163). The title of Chapter 8 is 'Functional Sentence Perspective: Thematic and Information Structures'. It is a rather dense chapter that deals with Functionalism, the Prague School and Thematic and Information Structure; here, Alba's words remind the reader that DA does not offer one definitive approach to the study of language in context, but is more "an attempt to describe and understand the different ways human beings understand their linguistic messages" (196).

The last part of the book is devoted to more recent perspectives. Chapter 9 discusses 'Post-Structuralist Theory and Social Theory', mainly through Foucault's (1980), Bakhtin's (1981) and Bourdieu's (1991) contributions to DA. This chapter introduces these two theories as the basis of Critical Discourse Analysis and Mediated Discourse Analysis, which are further discussed in the following two chapters. First, chapter 10 examines two Post-Structural perspectives: 'Critical Discourse Analysis and Positive Discourse Analysis', the latter viewed as a response to the former. Critical Discourse Analysis is presented by the author as a multidisciplinary approach that critically studies social problems and power structures in relation to discourse from diverse areas "such as rhetoric, stylistics, sociolinguistics, pragmatics, ethnography, conversation analysis, etc." (238). The aim of Positive Discourse Analysis, on the other hand, is presented with "the emphasis being put on the discourse we like rather than on the discourse we want to criticize" (254), that is to say, stressing more the positive than the negative aspects of power. The texts and exercises contained in the practice section give the reader the opportunity to examine discourse from a critical perspective, having examined texts using these two Post-Structural methods. Then, chapter 11 exposes one more Post-Structural approach, 'Mediated Discourse Analysis', a perspective that centers on human social action and explores every aspect of the environment as part of a larger context. The author emphasizes the interdisciplinarity of this approach and stops to analyze the position of Geosemiotics. Finally, the last chapter, entitled 'Further Issues in

Discourse Analysis', constitutes a very good closing for this comprehensive explanatory review. It lists other key aspects and concepts that should be borne in mind when studying DA, such as the selection of different units of analysis depending on the perspective chosen. It also provides a quick insight into some of the main types of genres and includes a note on textual cohesion and coherence, discourse markers and discourse strategies and functions. All in all, the volume ends with a solid conclusion, focusing its attention once again on interdisciplinarity and emphasizing what all the possible perspectives on the study of language in context have in common.

Although Alba's work is not theoretically as thorough as that of Shiffrin, Tannen and Hamilton (2003) *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis*, it likewise contains a variety of discourse studies and a synergy between theory and data analysis, although at a lower level than that of Shiffrin et al., given that Alba's book is clearly more specifically addressed to students than to experts. In fact, along the same line of Downing and Locke's (2006) well-known reference book *English Grammar. A University Course*, the present publication is very practical and self-explanatory, something that makes it suitable for self-study and distance learning education. Each chapter outline is always directly related to the main goals of the chapter; furthermore, every chapter contains an extensive number of textual examples and data analysis that illustrate the theory provided in the most appropriate manner, in a style similar to Tannen's (1993) *Framing in Discourse*. Then, the summary of the main ideas does not only help the reader to recap or review the information contained in the chapter but can also be valuable in terms of information scanning for the scholar who is looking for specific information throughout the book.

As to the self-evaluation questions that are placed at the end of each chapter, they are multiple choice questions that address mainly the theoretical issues discussed in each chapter, and can help for study review, but, given their closed nature, do not seem to help in checking if the reader has really understood the main ideas presented therein. Fortunately, these self-evaluation questions are complemented by practical exercises, in which students are asked to analyze different types of texts from various DA perspectives; here, readers can actually put the contents into use, that is to say, they can apply the theories described and really test their understanding of the concepts just read. Shiffrin's (1994) *Approaches to Discourse* also provides this type of practice at the end of each chapter, although when similar chapters of both works are compared, Shiffrin's usually contain a wider number of practical open exercises, and this entails a more varied and thorough practice in some cases.

Since the author does not treat in depth any of the approaches to DA presented, the 'further references' section at the end of every chapter turns out to be handy for the reader who finds a specific stance worthy of further study whenever it suits his/her academic interests. As far as the useful websites recommended in each chapter are concerned, although they complement the previous information in terms of interesting supplementary sources of information, it must be noted that this type of resource is very ephemeral and changeable (even more so when references to Wikipedia are provided). Thus, although they may be considered valuable today, they might not be so in a few months' time if they happen to be modified or deleted, which is very often the case on the World Wide Web.

The reference system of *Perspectives on Discourse Analysis* can be said to be genuinely exhaustive. The main authors who have studied this scientific field are addressed whenever necessary and so are all those who have played an important role in the evolution of the field: Austin (1962), Brown and Yule (1983), van Dijk (1985), Lakoff (1990), Tannen (1993) and Jefferson (2007), among others. In addition, the various approaches described are presented in a more or less chronological manner, something that enables the reader to understand how some perspectives on DA may have evolved from previous ones. In this sense, one remarkable aspect of the book is the neutral tone with which it addresses the various tendencies and authors. The author does not allow herself to be carried away by the possible criticisms that the various tendencies and authors may have received; thus, “it is [truly] up to analysts to choose a given approach or certain elements of different approaches in order to best suit the needs of their research” (196).

To describe DA is “not an easy task” (6), as the author points out towards the beginning of this volume. However, Alba ends up proving this first statement wrong, thanks to the mixture of pedagogical and critical style she uses to describe this field in the most comprehensive way possible for 409 pages. It could even be considered a somewhat reduced and updated version of van Dijk’s volumes entitled *Handbook of Discourse Analysis* (1985). Apart from commenting on almost everything that has been said on DA, the author provides a series of in-depth analyses of different text types, as well as practical exercises that constructively supplement the theoretical description. All in all, a very good reference book for students, thanks to its instructive approach, and a handy resource for scholars drawn to such a fascinating field.

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N. Talaván Zanón works as a Lecturer in the Foreign Languages Department at the Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia (UNED) in Madrid. She is a certified translator and currently holds the position of academic coordinator of English CI at the Centro Universitario de Idiomas a Distancia (Open University Language Centre), Spain.

Address: Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia, Facultad de Filología, Departamento de Filologías Extranjeras y sus Lingüísticas, Senda del Rey, 7, 28040 Madrid, Spain. Tel.: +34 913988626. Fax: +34 913987399.