Discourse and digital practices, doing discourse analysis in the digital age


A book review by Carlos Alberto Noriega Guzmán

In recent years, disciplines that study language have taken many approaches. One of the most prominent fields in these studies is discourse analysis. Exploring these papers, the reader can frequently find the study of meaning beyond the sentence, the role of the context in a given utterance, and the way social and political aspects shape an individual’s way of communicating. Although discourse analysis remains a trending topic on linguistics, due to its multifaceted nature, to define or frame its field of study remains to be quite an eclectic exercise. This is reflected in Discourse and digital practices, doing discourse analysis in the digital age edited by Rodney H. Jones, Alice Chick and Christoph A. Hafner (2015). For these scholars, digital practices are shaping the way people communicate, manage their social relationships and accomplish tasks while also challenging the classical concepts of friendship, social interactions, literacy, games, politics and even language nature itself.

In order to study contemporary digital practices such as the interaction with tablets, smartphones, websites, videogames and chat rooms, the authors faced the challenge of selecting existing methodologies and approaches to language study from discourse analysis and adapt
them to fit their necessities; a necessary task for the pioneer researcher on an emerging field of study. As good scholars, each one of the contributors described in detail their methodology while citing the inspiring approaches behind them, some of them are: textual analysis, conversation analysis, multimodal discourse analysis, critical discourse analysis, object ethnography, geosemiotics and interactional sociolinguistics. For future studies in the area, these methodologies leave a blueprint for the study of emerging digital practices and products such as apps, mobile devices and others.

It is necessary to point out that this book contains a collection of rather interesting studies where discourse analysis takes places in a many kinds of digital practices. For example, I invite you to read James Paul Gee (2015) in the second chapter of the book where the author employs an approach used to study syntax and semantics and adapts it to analyze a 2D videogame focusing not on the dialogues, but on the multimodal digital-human interaction. This interaction is described as what can be done in a virtual environment to fulfill a goal whether it means to choose a correct option from a menu or to stack multicolor British-accented rectangles to reach a point in a virtual map. The usage of this approach is well described and justified by Gee in an easy-to-understand way.

Published in early 2015, this book is one of the few which explore the way emerging technologies are taking part of our world from a linguistic perspective. It is therefore a good starting point for the study of digital practices and their impact on language. Discourse and digital practices comprises 15 chapters: first we have an introduction to discourse analysis and digital practices written by Rodney H. Jones, Alice Chik and Christoph A. Hafner (who edited this book); chapter two was written by James Paul Gee and is titled Discourse analysis of games; third is Discourse, cybernetics and the entextualisation of the self by previously mentioned editor Rodney H.
Jones who reflects about the self in mediated by digital practices; fourth chapter is titled *Tagging on Flickr as a social practice* by David Barton and it focuses on one feature of this image sharing platform; chapter five is *Intertextuality and interdiscursivity in online consumer reviews* by Camilla Vásquez which employs corpus linguistics to analyze the reviews of various types of products: hotels, restaurants, films, etc.; the sixth chapter is named *Youtube as text: spoken interaction analysis and digital discourse* by Phil Benson who studies one of the fastest growing web services of recent years; *Co-constructing identity in virtual worlds for children* is the title of chapter seven which is written by Christoph A. Hafner and it explores how children interact with entertainment website for kids *Moshi Monsters*; chapter eight is *Recreational language learning and digital practices: positioning and repositioning* by Alice Chik who studies the interaction between learners and trending language learning platforms such as *Duolingo* and *Busuu Language*; ninth chapter is *Investigating digital sex talk practices: a reflection on corpus-assisted discourse analysis* by Brian W. King who compiled the *Queer Chatroom Corpus* to study lexical markers; chapter 10 is *Apps, adults and young children: researching digital literacy practices in context* by Guy Merchant who draws attention to the way children interact with iPads; the eleventh chapter is titled ‘**Its changed my life**: iPhone as technological artifact’ by Victoria Carrington who also describes the interaction between people and a modern cellphone; chapter 12 is *Digital discourse@public space: flows of language online and offline* by Carmen Lee which I would say is one of the most interesting texts in this book because it deals with the way language used online is now being used in the real world; *The discourses of celebrity in the fanvid ecology of Club Penguin machinima* by Jackie Marsh is chapter 13 and it explores the culture and celebrities within this children gaming website; chapter 14 is *Discourses of ‘curation’ in digital times* by Ilana Synder who reflects about the act of curating (as it happens in
museums) and how it has moved to digital spaces for different purposes; finally, chapter 15 is The discursive construction of education in the digital age by Neil Selwyn who studies and comments about discourses of digital education. These are the contents of Discourse and digital practices, doing discourse in the digital age.

This is the book where a student, teacher, or linguist can find studies which mention products such as iPad, iPhone, Smartphones and Tablets; social networks like Busuu Language, Duolingo, Facebook, Instagram and Twitter; websites such as Amazon, Club Penguin, Moshi Monsters, Netflix, Spotify and Youtube; software as in iDrated, iTunes, iOS, Map App, MyFitnessPal, Second Life, Skype, Thomas Was Alone and World of Warcraft; emerging words such as apps, GR8, ICT, and retweet; the new meaning given to liking and likes, tagging and the symbol @; and even a corpus of sexual parts and sexual acts in chat rooms. This book, however, not only contains information about trending topics of the contemporary pop-culture. The authors and editors enrich their contributions with theoretical frameworks that include prominent scholars such as David Crystal, Malcolm Coulthard, John Sinclair, Michel Foucault, Norman Fairclough, Ron Scollon, Suzanne W. Scollon, Brian Tomlinson, Lev Vygotsky, George Yule, Gillian Brown and even Plato. Needless to say, for a user of these products and reader of these authors, the outcome of this book is not only interesting but also entertaining. As it can be inferred, this book reflects the usage of a plethora of discourse analysis tools in a descriptive way which can be very useful for those who attempt to work in the field of digital practices, in other words, the book addresses its objective of studying contemporary digital practices by employing these tools effectively.

Discourse and digital practices is a resource book for everyone who studies digital practices or digital literacy. For students, this is in advanced courses where discourse analysis has been studied as well as syntax, semantics, corpus linguistics and other research related subjects. This
is recommended because the authors adapt methodologies and use technicalities and concepts that might be difficult to understand for the beginner student of linguistics. For example, Foucault’s notion of the economy of the discursive constellation in the study of celebrities’ music videos of Club Penguin in Youtube by Marsh; the change of semiotic affordance and its relation to communication technologies described by Fairclough and used to study the usage of the iPhone by Carrington; and Scollon and Scollon’s geosemiotics used to study internet speak in public spaces by Lee. This is an overall great and interesting book, I assure many teachers and students will enjoy it.