

4.3 Discourse analysis



Pre-exercise: Discourse analysis

1. Pair work: Look at the word pairs. Discuss the difference between using e.g. the word *unemployed* instead of *in between jobs* and so on.

unemployed

in between jobs

half empty

half full

incompetent

inexperienced

not a problem

with pleasure

The word *discourse* comes from the French word *discours* which means to *talk* or *conversation*. A discourse is a certain way to talk about a certain topic. Therefore, in a discourse you have a certain perspective on a certain topic which is reflected by the use of words and concepts you use in the discourse. You can for example talk about a working class discourse, a business discourse or a gender discourse.

The main focus of discourse analysis is, therefore, to analyse the discourse used in a text. This involves looking at the way the text talks about or understands a certain problem, notion, concept or phenomenon. In other words, discourse analysis will reveal hidden motivations behind a text or a speech.

Example of discourse

When a speaker deals with a certain notion or concept in a speech, e.g. the concept of democracy, it is usually not said explicitly how the speaker understands democracy. However, the way the speaker implicitly talks about the concept, through for example the use of words, implies how the speaker understands the concept.

Thus, discourse analysis will not be able to provide absolute answers to a specific problem or understanding of a concept/notion. However, discourse analysis is meant to provide a better awareness of the hidden motivations in a text and thereby enable us to gain a more comprehensive view of the problem/notion/concept in question.

notion sb. begreb
reveal vb. afsløre
implicitly adv. underforstået
awareness sb. forståelse
comprehensive adj. dybdegående, omfattende

When using discourse analysis there are certain key elements to look for.

Nodal point

The nodal point of a text is very central as it is the key problem/concept or notion to be analysed. As mentioned in the example above, a nodal point of a text or speech could be democracy. Then, you will have to analyse how the discourse concerning democracy is expressed implicitly in the text or speech.

The nodal point is not a clearly defined concept/notion. The concept of democracy can be understood in different ways. This is exactly why it becomes interesting to use discourse analysis in order to find out, how a particular text or speech builds up a certain discourse concerning the concept of democracy.

Chain of equivalence

Words connected to the nodal point are called *chain of equivalence*. It is through the chain of equivalence that value is added to the nodal point. Therefore, the choice of words is very important. The value of a word is rarely neutral, so it is important for the sender to choose the right words to add the proper meaning and value to the nodal point.

Words have a denotative meaning and a connotative meaning.

Denotation refers to the exact meaning of a word and not the feelings or ideas that the word suggests.

Connotation refers to the idea or feeling a word invokes in a person.

Example: The denotative and connotative meaning of a word

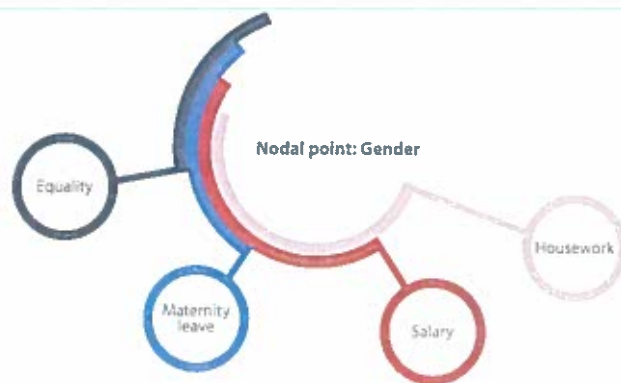
The denotative meaning of the word *chair* is a place to sit whereas the connotative meaning of the word *chair* can be *comfortable* or *uncomfortable* depending on the feeling the word invokes in a person (often based on the person's experiences)

Once, you have found the chain of equivalence, it is important to ask some of the following questions:

- What is the exact meaning of the words in the chain of equivalence?
- Which connotations do the words invoke?
- Which effect do the words have?

nodal point sb. nodalpunkt
chain of equivalence sb. ækvivalenskæde
rarely adv. sjældent
invoke vb. påkalde

Example of nodal point and chain of equivalence



Exercise: chain of equivalence

1. The nodal point of Obama's farewell speech from 10 January 2017 is democracy. Find examples of words which could be part of the chain of equivalence in this short extract. Discuss his use of words by using the questions above.

“ Our Constitution is a remarkable, beautiful gift. But it's really just a piece of parchment. It has no power on its own. We, the people, give it power – with our participation, and the choices we make. Whether or not we stand up for our freedoms. Whether or not we respect and enforce the rule of law. America is no fragile thing. But the gains of our long journey to freedom are not assured.

www.latimes.com

Chain of difference

Some texts may put up nodal points in opposition to each other. Then you talk about a chain of difference. A chain of difference is defined by two opposed chains of equivalence.

Example: the chain of difference

In the immigration debate one chain of equivalence could use words such as *positive resource*, *added cultural dimension* where the other chain of equivalence would use words such as *burden*, *criminals*, *lazy*. In this way, the text establishes opposite nodal points where one has positive words and the other negative words. In such a case, you talk about a chain of difference

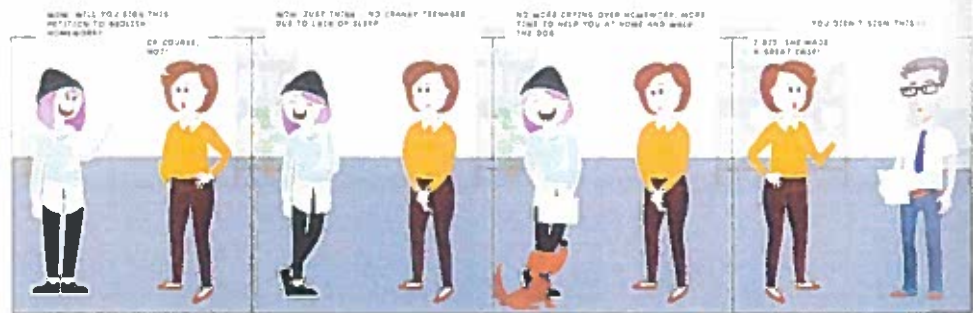
nodal point sb. nodalpunkt
chain of difference sb. differenskæde

Guide to discourse analysis

Discourse analysis is primarily used when analysing non-fiction texts such as articles, blogs etc. Here is a guide which can help you when using discourse analysis.

1. Read the text and find the nodal point of the text.
2. Look for the chain of equivalence after finding the nodal point. They are words connected to the nodal point. In order to find the words, ask yourself if they give added value to or more information about the nodal point.
3. When you have found the words which, you believe, are part of the chain of equivalence, ask yourself the following questions:
 - a. What is the exact meaning of the words in the chain of equivalence?
 - b. Which connotations do the words invoke?
 - c. Which effect do the words have?
4. Sum up your findings and draw a conclusion regarding your findings.
5. When there are two nodal points and two opposing chains of equivalence, you have a chain of difference. Do the same analysis of the chain of difference by asking the same questions and sum up by making a comparison of the two chains of equivalence.
6. You can also use Fairclough's model which puts the text you analyse into a societal context.

4.4 Argumentation theory



Another way of analysing language is by looking at the argumentation of a text. Put differently, which point of views does the sender of the text want the receiver to agree to and which means are used to make sure of that?

Argumentation theory has its roots in classic rhetoric (see page 141). Therefore, many of the elements of argumentation theory come from the art of rhetoric such as the three modes of