Chapter 7

# The research enterprise

This chapter will . . .

- discuss methodological foundations of research on language, culture and learning from a sociocultural perspective;
- discuss some issues and concerns important to the doing of 'good' research.

## 7.1 Introduction

Traditional conceptualisations of research in applied linguists have often considered those who do research on language and learning to be a distinct, elite group of professionals who differ from those who teach. The task of researchers is to produce new knowledge, while the task of practitioners is to make use of this new knowledge to improve their teaching. A sociocultural perspective of research makes no such distinction. Instead, in defining research as a systematic quest for new understandings and new ways of attending to the world, such activity is viewed as a natural component of all applied linguists' activity. The distinction deemed relevant is that which distinguishes expert researchers from less proficient researchers. Rather than being based on one's professional position, the distinction is predicated on an individual's degree of expertise in a range of knowledge, skills and abilities needed to engaged in a complex and demanding task.

The purpose of this chapter is to lay out some of the general issues and concerns embodied in the enterprise of research with which anyone interested in doing research on language and culture from a sociocultural perspective should at least be familiar. The discussion is not meant to turn

novice researchers into experts; for this, one needs extensive training and experience. Rather, it aims to highlight some of the basic issues involved in doing 'good' research that are worthy of consideration.

## 7.2 Methodological foundations of research on language and culture from a sociocultural perspective

One important aspect of research expertise involves being aware of and able to articulate the theoretical premises embodied in different approaches to research. The ways in which we perceive the world and our relationship to it, however tacit this understanding may be, frame our understanding of the nature of research, the purposes for which we engage in it, the kinds of research questions we ask, and the methods we choose to seek answers to those questions. Before undertaking a discussion on possibilities for research on language and culture, it is useful to review some of the more fundamental presuppositions embodied in a sociocultural perspective.

A first premise has to do with the nature of knowledge. As we have discussed in earlier chapters, a more traditional 'linguistics applied' perspective configures knowledge as a rational, universal entity with unchanging properties that exists separate from and independent of the knower. Language knowledge specifically is perceived as abstract, symbolic representations that, although located in the head of individuals, can be extracted from individual mind, and subjected to inquiry independently of the varied ways in which they are used.

In contrast, a sociocultural perspective defines knowledge not as some rational system existing apart from its users, but as a socially constituted cultural construct. This construct exists not within universal mind but within our communities, and is given shape by the communicative activities in which we engage as members of our communities, their tools and the ways we use the tools to mediate our actions in our activities with others. It is from our mediated actions that knowledge takes shape, including its forms and functions, and from which referential understandings of the world are drawn. From this view, then, language forms cannot be understood apart from their contexts of use. Rather, they are bound together, existing as two mutually constitutive components of systems of action.

A second premise has to do with how we gain knowledge. In the more traditional view, gaining knowledge is seen as a universal, natural process of assimilating new knowledge structures into already existing structures.



Since the structures themselves have their own shapes, embedded within and yet external to the individual, the individual does not, in fact cannot, play any fundamental role in giving shape to the new knowledge. Rather, the new knowledge stands apart from the knower, and the shape it takes is imposed on it by the coherent, logical and universal systems already in the mind.

In contrast, a sociocultural perspective does not separate individual social actors from the process of 'coming to know'. Rather, they are intimately connected in what is considered to be a fundamentally social activity. As we discussed in earlier chapters, individuals gain knowledge from their involvement with more experienced others in their sociocultural worlds. These more experienced members guide – in both explicit and tacit ways – less experienced individuals in taking notice of particular aspects of their worlds as they (re)create them in their jointly enacted experiences. By their actions they give shape to both the form and substance of the knowledge that less experienced individuals eventually accept as their own. Also structuring both the processes and outcomes of knowing are individuals' past experiences. That is to say, because individuals are culturally structured social beings, continually (re)created in their sociocultural practices enacted within specific sociohistorical contexts, the knowledge they create in any locally situated context of activity is also shaped by the histories individuals bring with them to these contexts.

A third premise has to do with the nature of inquiry. A traditional view makes a distinction between two kinds of research: basic or theoretical, and applied or practical. The purpose of basic research is to expand our theoretical understandings of the universal principles by which the world operates so that we may better predict and control what happens in it. In assuming language and culture knowledge to consist of internally coherent systems by which their existence – apart from any context – is governed, the role of such inquiry is to understand the structural specifications, the formal properties, of the knowledge systems as fully as possible so that we can predict how individuals, universally inscribed, make use of them. In such inquiry, sites of language use become sources of data only in that they allow for the collection of samples from which forms can be extracted and isolated, and hypotheses about the formal properties of systems can be made. Other sources of data are researchers' own intuitions. Since language systems are thought to be internal to all native speakers, it is assumed that, as native speakers of the language, the use of their own insights as sources of data is a plausible means for researchers to hypothesise about the formal properties of the systems and construct models of them.

Another concern of basic research from this traditional perspective, at least as it has related to applied linguistics, lies in uncovering the internally driven linguistic and cognitive principles and processes involved in assimilating, storing and accessing knowledge of other language systems for the

purpose of constructing a more adequate theory to explain these phenomena. Here, research begins with the formulation of propositions or hypotheses about the kinds of natural, lawful relationships thought to obtain between sets of variables. Studies are designed to test assumptions about the relationships, and the findings are used to revise the theory with which the researcher began. Investigations concerned with language learning in applied linguistics that have taken this approach have sought answers to such questions as: What are the linguistic and cognitive mechanisms that move a learner from one state of knowledge to another? How do individual differences in terms of innate cognitive and linguistics abilities affect this movement? How does the manipulation of external forces influence the efficacy of the internal process? The answers to such questions lead researchers towards the construction of a universal theory of language development.

In contrast to basic research, the purpose of applied or practical research from a traditional perspective is to use our understandings of the nature of language and culture systems – and human development arising from basic, theoretical investigations – to address real-world concerns. As originally conceived, this was the realm of applied linguistics. A primary goal was to relate theory to practice, that is, to apply findings about the nature of language and culture to the solving of problems concerned with, for example, the teaching of languages, language policy decision making, the assessment of language abilities and disabilities, and workplace communication (Davies, 1999; Widdowson, 2000). In this view, the linguist – or in the case of research on language learning, the psycholinguist – is the scientist whose task is to build theories about language and about learning, while the applied linguist is the practitioner whose task is to take to the road in search of real-world problems that can be remedied – or at least better understood – by applying these theories on language and language learning.

A sociocultural perspective on the nature of inquiry differs fairly significantly from the more traditional view. Here, the worlds we live in form the very heart of research activity. That is to say, a sociocultural perspective makes no distinction between basic and applied research as used in the traditional paradigm. The goal of research is not to reveal some underlying truth or sets of universal principles and properties of human nature. Rather, it is to understand the communicative worlds in which and by which we live our lives – that is, to understand how we make our way in the world, not how the world is made inside us (Reed, 1996).

To reach such understanding entails the examination of our particular language games or lived experiences, the meanings residing in them, the social, cultural and political forces that give rise to these meanings, and the consequences that participation in these games have for individual language use and development. Such examinations will reveal intricacies of our communicative worlds and make clear how our worlds, our social identities and the roles we play, are connected to, and partially constructed by, our communicative actions and those of others, and by the larger sociohistorical forces embodied in them. So doing will make visible the 'taken-for-granted' nature of our everyday lives and thereby 'render the character of our own and other people's practices publicly discussable and teachable' (Shotter, 1997: 304). Such understanding can also lead to the development of a theory of practice (de Certeau, 1984; Lave and Wenger, 1991). The goal of such a theory is to help to explain, on a broader scale, the communicative actions by which individuals within groups, and groups within communities, (re)create and respond to both their sociohistorical and locally situated interactive conditions, and the consequences – linguistic, social, cognitive and otherwise – of their doing so.

**Quote 7.1 John Shotter on the goal of research on communication from a sociocultural perspective**

We must study how, by interweaving our talk with our other actions and activities, we can first develop and sustain between us different, particular *ways* of relating ourselves to each other. That is, that we should first study how we construct what Wittgenstein calls our different shared *forms of life* with their associated *language games*... And then, once we have a grasp of the general character of our (normative) relations both with each other and to our surroundings – a grasp of their logical grammar – we should turn to a study of how, as distinct individuals, we can 'reach out' *from within* these forms of life, so to speak, to make the myriad different kinds of contact with our surroundings *through* the various ways of making sense of such contacts our forms of life provide.

Shotter (1996: 299–300; emphasis in the original)

In terms of learning, the goal of research is to lead us to an understanding of the conditions by which learners' involvement in the various constellations of their language socialisation practices – in and out of the classrooms – is shaped, and how their evolving participation affects their development as language users and language learners. This entails identification and characterisation of the communicative practices, the social institutions in which they are embedded, and the resources by which such practices are constituted in communities of language learners, be they in more formal learning settings like schools, or in other less formal settings like community clubs, civic organisations or the workplace. Also called for is the specification of the ways in which the participants in these activities use the resources of their learning practices to reflect and create

particular settings, their individual identities and role relationships within these settings, and their collective identities across them. The third strand of research involves the examination of the consequences that result from individuals' long-term participation both within practices across time and across communities of learners.

Identifying the complex webs of communicative activity through which communities of language learners are formed, their sociohist-orical conditions and the varied trajectories of language use giving rise to different formations of individual identities and social relations, and following the developmental paths down which individual participation in the activities lead, can help us to understand more fully the intrinsic link between the kinds of communicative environments into which learners are socialised and their developmental consequences. More generally, they can help us to construct a theory of learning – a psychological theory of communicative action (A.A. Leontiev, 1981) – that explains the fundamental relationship between social activity and learning in ways that more mainstream theories of language learning do not, and indeed, cannot. Such an understanding in turn will provide us with a principled basis for creating and sustaining communities of learners that help to shape learners' language development in ways that are considered to be appropriate to their social, academic and other needs.

**Quote 7.2** **Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger on a theory of social practice**

Briefly, a theory of social practice emphasizes the relational interdependency of agent and world, activity, meaning, cognition, learning, and knowing. It emphasizes the inherently socially negotiated character of meaning and the interested, concerned character of the thought and action of persons-in-activity. This view also claims that learning, thinking, and knowing are relations among people in activity in, with, and arising from the socially and culturally structured world. This world is socially constituted; objective forms and systems of activity, on the one hand, and agents' subjective and intersubjective understandings of them, on the other, mutually constitute both the world and its experienced forms.

Lave and Wenger (1991: 50–1)

### 7.2.1 Choice of methods: quantitative versus qualitative

In addition to making one's assumptions clear, doing good research involves choosing appropriate methods for collecting and analysing data, since the methods we choose to use will shape the kinds of data we gather



and ultimately what we find. Data generally take two forms: quantitative and qualitative. The basic distinction between the two is that quantitative data are usually expressed in terms of numbers or amounts while qualitative data are not. Instead, qualitative data can take many forms, including verbal and non-verbal means of social action, pictorial and other kinds of visual representations, and so on. Although this division is a common one, a closer look reveals that they are not distinct categories. Rather, they are intimately connected in that quantitative data are based upon qualitative judgements, and all qualitative data can be described and manipulated numerically.

The purpose of research on language and culture is to discern, examine, and interpret meaningful communicative patterns and plans, and to explain them in terms of larger ideological themes and topics that emerge from the patterns. To generate well-grounded, warranted claims about the patterns and themes detected through analysis of the data, we must rely on counting – a basic means for determining quantity. The more often an action takes place, or a form appears, or a concept or idea is generated, the more basis we have for determining whether there is a pattern or theme. Once we have determined the existence of a pattern or a theme, we generally rely on the number of times it occurs to determine its significance. The more often something happens, the more warranted is our claim of conventionality. Similarly, the more a theme appears in particular oral or written texts, the stronger our claim can be of its significance to the person or persons to whom the texts belong.

The more we build our analysis on the basis of frequency, the less concern there is that the examples we have chosen to illustrate a claim are selective, representing our own hunches, rather than illustrative of the whole body of data from which the examples are drawn. Our use of such quantitative methods allows us to see patterns of language use that we might not have seen if we relied on our intuitions, and thus can 'act as a check on the insights derived from qualitative analysis' (Layder, 1993: 127).

On the other side, no matter which particular means of quantifying data we choose to use, the meaningfulness of the quantified data can only be determined through qualitative judgements based on the perceptions of those from whose lives the data are drawn. That is to say, detecting patterns of communicative behaviour can tell us how ubiquitous something is in the full body of empirical evidence. However, what it cannot tell us is the meaning such patterns have for those whose patterns they are. It can, as Widdowson (2000: 7) has pointed out, 'only analyze the textual traces of the processes whereby meaning is achieved; it cannot account for the complex interplay of linguistic and contextual factors whereby discourse is enacted'. Without some form of qualitative evaluation of the data, the numbers remain meaningless.

In some corners in applied linguistics, a great divide exists between those who use quantitative data and those who use qualitative data. Because traditional approaches to language learning have often used quantitative methods for collecting and analysing data, it is sometimes assumed that all quantitative methods carry with them the same assumptions underlying the methodology for which they are used. That is, quantitative methods have become associated with deductive, hypothesis testing research whose goal is to uncover universal, context-independent accounts of meaning-based systems. Similarly, all qualitative methods have become associated with ethnographic, inductive research whose goal is to understand particular cultural worlds (Schutz et al., in press). Such a divide, however, as pointed out by Potter (1996) and others (Bryman, 1984), is founded on a misunderstanding in that it fails to distinguish between the methodology (general epistemological assumptions underlying the general purposes and goals for undertaking a research project) and methods (the various tools and strategies that can be used to gather and analyse data in the attempt to reach the articulated goals).

**Quote 7.3** **Shirley Brice Heath on the value of enhancing qualitative data with electronic means for gathering quantitative data**

[E]lectronic supports for quantitative analysis, often simple frequency counts of word usage, have the potential to enhance greatly certain behavioral or attitudinal issues. For example, if a frequency count of negatives turns out to be much higher for one teacher as compared with another, linguists are alerted to consider a host of contextual factors ranging from the type of lesson to the possibility of different ideological positions the two teachers may hold with regard to students' ability to handle the subject matter . . . The constant interplay of rich descriptive materials from field notes and such simple quantitative steps as frequency counts or ratios helps researchers guard against rushing to select the 'perfect' example from their qualitative data to illustrate a point.

Heath (2000: 54–5)

From a sociocultural perspective, both quantitative and qualitative data can help us to gain an understanding of the worlds in which we live, and thus should be viewed as complementary rather than competing forms of data (Layder, 1993). The question, then, becomes not *whether* qualitative and quantitative methods can be combined but *how* can they be combined to enhance our understanding of the data? The choices we make in terms of the kinds of data we collect and the methods we use to analyse them depend on the research questions we ask. Our task as researchers is to



choose the most appropriate tools for the study. In the end, what will make our research 'good' is using the methods we have chosen systematically and rigorously so that the claims we make represent our data accurately and fairly even if the answers to our questions are not what we thought or hoped they would be.

**Quote 7.4** **Susan Berkowitz on judging the validity and quality of qualitative research**

. . . there is broad consensus concerning the qualitative analyst's need to be self-aware, honest, and reflective about the analytic process. Analysis is not just the end product, it is also the repertoire of processes used to arrive at that particular place. In qualitative analysis, it is not necessary or even desirable that anyone else who did a similar study should find exactly the same thing or interpret his or her findings in precisely the same way. However, once the notion of analysis as a set of uniform, impersonal, universally applicable procedures is set aside, qualitative analysts are obliged to describe and discuss how they did their work in ways that are, at the very least, accessible to other researchers. Open and honest presentation of analytic processes provides an important check on an individual analyst's tendencies to get carried away, allowing others to judge for themselves whether the analysis and interpretation are credible in light of the data.

Berkowitz (1997)

### 7.2.2 Transcription issues

Since data for studies of language and culture from a sociocultural perspective are taken from naturally occurring events, collection methods, as noted earlier, often involve video- and audiotapings of these events. For the purposes of analysis, these taped events must be transcribed, or represented in another form, which most often is writing. While on the surface the process of re-presenting the activity graphically may seem unproblematic and fairly straightforward, it is, as Elinor Ochs (1979) and others (e.g. Duranti, 1997; Edwards and Westgate, 1994) have pointed out, a theoretical task in itself.

It is theoretical in that it entails our making choices about what to include and what to ignore. That is to say, in the process of transcribing, we select certain actions from a much larger repertoire to re-present in another form. In turn, the specific aspects we select shape what we determine to be relevant in the analysis. For example, in noting only verbal cues in our encoding of a communicative activity, we give primacy to verbal cues as significant tools in the realisation of the event before we have even

begun the analysis. The decision to leave out non-verbal and paralinguistic actions makes it impossible to consider communicative acts realised non-verbally, such as a pointed finger to direct attention, raised eyebrows to indicate surprise, eye gaze to signal a change of turns and so on. Consequently, we are constrained in reaching a full understanding of the event as experienced by those whose event it is. The point is not that all possible actions be included, since no transcript can fully recapture the totality of experience. Rather, our task as researchers is to be clear about the criteria we use in choosing what to transcribe, and to construct a transcript that represents the particular aspects of the activity in ways that are consistent with our research goals (Duranti, 1997).

Transcription systems have been developed to represent a wide variety of communicative actions, including paralinguistic and non-verbal actions in addition to linguistically instantiated actions. For example, because a major concern of conversation analysis – a field of research interested in talk-in-interaction – is with the sequential rendering of social order between participants, transcription symbols have been designed specifically to reveal the sequence of actions. One typical symbol used for this purpose is the left bracket ([) to indicate overlapping turns, as illustrated in Example 7.1. Where the bracket occurs in the transcript indicates the point at which the participants are speaking at the same time. Example 7.2 contains a list of additional transcription conventions. Psathas (1995) points out that one system of symbols is not necessarily better than another. What is important is that we choose the one that makes salient those particular aspects of the event that we are interested in, and are consistent in our use of symbols to render the findings 'readable' by others doing similar kinds of research.

**Example 7.1** Use of left bracket to indicate overlapping turns

Tom: I used to smoke [a lot
Bob: [he thinks he's real tough

*Source*: Taken from Psathas (1995: 71)

Edward and Westgate (1994) note that whatever we choose to transcribe, it is important when reporting our findings to state our criteria for selecting sections of transcribed data to illustrate an analysis. Where the issue is not even recognised, the question arises as to whether the selected samples of transcribed data are convenient rather than representative examples of the whole body of data. As such, we run the risk of using data to support our own version of reality, whether or not it adequately reflects the reality of those whose communicative experiences they are.



**Example 7.2** Some commonly used transcription symbols in research on language use

| Symbol | Meaning |
| --- | --- |
| . | (period) Falling intonation |
| ? | (question mark) Rising intonation |
| , | (comma) Continuing intonation |
| - | (hyphen) Marks an abrupt cut-off |
| :: | (colon(s)) Prolonging of sound |
| never | (underlining) Stressed syllable or word |
| WORD | (all caps) Loud speech |
| °word° | (degree symbols) Quiet speech |
| >word< | (more than and less than) Quicker speech |
| <word> | (less than and more than) Slowed speech |
| hh | (series of h's) Aspiration or laughter |
| .hh | (h's preceded by dot) Inhalation |
| [ ] | (brackets) Simultaneous or overlapping speech |
| = | (equals sign) Contiguous utterances |
| (2.4) | (number in parentheses) Length of a silence |
| (.) | (period in parentheses) Micro-pause, 2/10 second or less |
| ( ) | (empty parentheses) Non-transcribable segment of talk |
| (word) | (word or phrase in parentheses) Transcriptionist doubt |
| ((gazing)) | (double parentheses) Description of non-speech activity |

(From the journal *Research on Language and Social Interaction*)

## 7.3 Research ethics

A final, important issue in the development of research expertise concerns *ethics*. All good research requires that researchers conduct themselves responsibly and ethically. Ethical approaches to research begin with a well-designed research project that includes the clear and adequate articulation of the theoretical presuppositions framing the study. It also entails the setting out of a clear rationale for undertaking the study, a clear statement of the questions with which the researcher is concerned, identification of the kinds of data needed to answer them, and clear articulation of the sources of data and the methods to be used for gathering and analysing the data.

In addition to a well-planned study, ethical research requires behaving responsibly towards participants. Responsible behaviour involves securing

informed permission to participate from all participants from whom or about whom data will be collected. Informed permission means that prospective participants must be fully acquainted with the procedures and risks involved in the research before giving their written consent to participate. Moreover, ethical behaviour towards participants requires that all participation in the research project be voluntary and not in any way coerced. This means, for example, that individual learner involvement in a study of language learning should never be tied to course requirements; nor should the involvement of classroom teachers be required as part of their official positions as teachers.

Finally, ethical behaviour towards participants requires guaranteeing prospective participants that their participation will remain confidential. This means ensuring the participants that any identifying information will not be made available to anyone who is not directly involved in the study. Thus, for example, when sharing the findings with a wider audience, only pseudonyms should be used, unless the researcher has been given participants' permission to use their real names. Depending on the nature of the research, the researcher or the participants may wish to keep all identities anonymous. In this case participant identities are unknown even to the researcher. This might be warranted in a study in which individuals are asked for personal opinions. If they do not have to identify themselves on the form they may be more willing to share their opinions. Additional components of responsible behaviour towards participants include allowing for adequate time to arrange data collection procedures with participants rather than doing it at the last minute, keeping to the schedule that has been agreed by the participants; and formally thanking participants for their involvement at the end of the project (Wallace, 1998).

Most professional groups have a code of ethics that sets out standards of ethical and professional behaviour for their members. The British Association of Applied Linguistics, for example, produced a set of guidelines in 1994 that are intended to help applied linguists to maintain high standards and respond to new opportunities, 'acting in the spirit of good equal opportunities practice and showing due respect to all participants, to the values of truth, fairness and open democracy, and to the integrity of applied linguistics as a body of knowledge and a mode of inquiry'.*

More recently, the International Association of Applied Linguistics/Association Internationale de Linguistique Appliquée adapted these suggestions into a code of good practice for applied linguists world wide.

In addition, most professional institutions and organisations have official review boards whose task is to ensure that research projects involving human participants proposed by their members meet standards of ethical behaviour. These boards determine, for example, whether and how well

* Readers should refer to http://www.baal.org.uk/goodprac.htm.



the rights of the research participants are protected, how well risks to the participants are minimised and whether the anticipated benefits outweigh any potential risk. They also determine the adequacy and appropriateness of the plans for obtaining informed consent, and of the qualifications of the researcher to conduct research involving human participants. In addition to becoming familiar with the standards of good practice endorsed by the professional associations in which they hold membership, those conducting research in applied linguistics, or hoping to, should be familiar with and willing to abide by their home institutions' procedures and regulations for engaging in research activity.

**Quote 7.5** **Introduction to the document *Recommendations on Good Practice in Applied Linguistics* endorsed by the British Association of Applied Linguistics**

In the course of their work, which includes teaching, research, administration and consultancy, applied linguists often face a variety of conflicting interests and competing obligations. This document aims to assist applied linguists in their awareness and response to these dilemmas and the choices they entail. To do so, it points to a range of principles and values. Some, such as the commitment to equal opportunities and to fair employment practices, are general in their scope. Others are more specific to academic work and to applied linguistics. Ethical priorities are the central concern throughout this text, but it leans more to discussion in terms of 'could' than prescription in terms of 'must'.

*Source*: http://www.baal.org.uk/goodprac.htm

## 7.4 Summary

As discussed in this chapter, good research is dependent not on one's professional role – that is, whether one is, say, a university professor or classroom teacher. Rather, it depends on one's degree of research expertise. Among other knowledge, skills and abilities, this expertise involves understanding and being able to articulate one's assumptions about the nature of knowledge, of knowing, and of both the nature and purpose of inquiry. It is also a matter of asking relevant questions, choosing the most appropriate tools for answering the questions, and adhering to ethical standards of professional behaviour throughout.

Such expertise does not just happen once we decide to gather data. Rather, it is a life-long process, involving extensive, active experiences in communities of researchers. Part of the process of becoming bona fide

members of these communities involves regularly engaging in professional conferences, reading and contributing to professional journals and books, and connecting with others via professional electronic discussion lists and bulletin boards. It also entails a collective willingness to look past our current understandings, to encourage exploration in unfamiliar territories, and to be open to unexpected experiences and discoveries in these quests.

In the chapters that follow, I present an overview of some of the more common approaches to the study of language, culture and learning from a sociocultural perspective along with a set of basic guidelines for undertaking research. Also included are suggestions for research projects that individuals at any level of experience in various contexts can undertake, and a collection of additional resources that readers may find useful in their teaching and research endeavours.

## Further reading

Booth, W.C., Colomb, G. and Williams, J.M. (1995) *Craft of research*. Chicago: University of Chicago. This instructional text provides a detailed, practical overview of how to plan, carry out, and report on research for any field and at any level. Aimed especially at novice researchers, the book discusses how to choose a topic, and plan for, organise and implement a research study. It also details how to write a convincing report of findings.

Cameron, D., Frazer, E., Harvey, P. Rampton, B. and Richardson, K. (1992) *Researching language: Issues of power and method*. London: Routledge. This text addresses issues of the different kinds of power relationships that develop between researchers and their participants, with the authors providing examples from their own research experiences to illustrate their points. Also provided are suggestions for those who engage in research for developing a mutually beneficial research process.

Creswell, J. (2001) *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill. This offers an integrated overview of both quantitative and qualitative approaches to educational research. It includes descriptions of eight research designs: experimental, correlational, survey, grounded theory, ethnography, narrative, mixed method, and action research.

Edwards, J.A. and Lampert, M.D. (eds) (1993) *Talking data: Transcription and coding in discourse research*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum. This collection of essays examines the details of transcribing and coding data that are primarily oral. The chapters are divided into three sections – transcription, coding and resources – and topics include systems of discourse transcription, the analysis of prosody and conversational exchanges, and the coding of child language data.

Vogt, W.P. (1999) *Dictionary of statistics and methodology: A nontechnical guide for the social sciences* (2nd edn). Newbury Park, CA: Sage. This book provides about 2,000 definitions of statistical and methodological terms that are used in the social and behavioural sciences. The definitions are written clearly, and many include examples. All are designed to help readers to understand their use in research reports and articles.

Chapter 8

# Approaches to research on language, culture and learning

This chapter will . . .

- describe six general approaches used to research language, culture and learning from a sociocultural perspective.

## 8.1 Introduction

While there is a variety of research approaches from which one can choose when planning research, six are commonly used to engage in research on language, culture and learning from a sociocultural perspective. They are: the ethnography of communication, interactional sociolinguistics, conversational analysis, discourse analysis, critical discourse analysis, and the microgenetic approach. Although the six approaches have their roots in different fields, they share the following features. First, they approach the study of language and culture as one dialogic, mutually constituted unit. Thus, all studies of language are also considered to be studies of culture. Second, they consider social activity to be their unit of analysis. While the size of the unit may vary from one-word actions to larger cultural, institutional and historical activities, the general concern is with uncovering the sociocultural worlds that are constituted in the actions we take and, conversely, uncovering the actions by which our worlds are constituted. This means that the approaches are empirically based, relying on data taken from naturally occurring contexts of action. Finally, while the data are generally qualitative in nature, these approaches recognise the value of using a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods for collecting and analysing data.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a short overview of each of these six approaches. The overviews are not meant to be comprehensive,

but are meant to serve as primers, particularly for novice researchers. For more detailed explanations, readers are encouraged to explore each approach more fully on their own. To help, I have included a list of readings for each that cites studies using the approach, and essays about the approach itself. Rather than including the lists at the end of the chapter, as I have done for previous chapters, I have included them after each section describing the particular approach. The lists are not meant to be inclusive, only illustrative. A search of any database of academic journals and books will surely lead readers to many more examples.

## 8.2 Ethnography of communication

As discussed in Chapter 1, Dell Hymes developed an approach to the study of language and culture called the *ethnography of communication*. The focus of this approach is on capturing patterns of language use as used by members of particular sociocultural groups in particular contexts to reflect and create their social worlds. Its central unit of analysis is the communicative event. As noted by Hymes (1962: 13),

> The starting point is the ethnographic analysis of the communicative habits of a community in their totality, determining what count as communicative events, and as their components, and conceiving no communicative behavior as independent of the set framed by some setting or implicit question. The communicative event is thus central.

**Quote 8.1 Dell Hymes on the focus of an ethnography of communication**

> It [Ethnography of communication] is a mode of enquiry that carries with it a substantial content. Whatever one's focus of inquiry, as a matter of course, one takes into account the local form of general properties of social life – patterns of role and status, rights and duties, differential command of resources, transmitted values, environmental constraints. It locates the local situation in space, time, and kind, and discovers its particular forms and center of gravity, as it were, for the maintenance of social order and the satisfaction of expressive impulse.
>
> Hymes (1980: 100)

As a way to describe systematically the links between the use of language forms and context in a communicative event, Hymes proposed the *SPEAKING* model. This framework was constructed as a guide to researchers to enable systematic descriptions of communicative events across communities and groups. That is, the framework is meant to help the researcher to connect linguistic forms to particular cultural practices and, on a broader scale, to uncover the particular ideologies about the participants' worlds embodied in their practices (Hymes, 1998). Each letter of the SPEAKING model represents one of the components of a communicative event to be described; all are interrelated in that each is defined by and helps to define the other. Likewise, the framework itself is contingent on the particular analysis of an event: i.e. as it is used to enhance our understanding of the event, the event itself helps to transform our understanding of the framework. The individual components of the SPEAKING model are:

- ***S**ituation*, including the physical and temporal setting and scene and its particular cultural definition;
- ***P**articipants*, including their identities in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, social status and other relevant features, and their roles, relationships and responsibilities as participants in the event;
- expected ***E**nds* or outcomes of the event and both group and individual participant goals;
- the particular speech ***A**cts* constituting the event, including their form, content and sequential arrangements;
- the ***K**ey* or tone underlying the event, for example, whether it is humorous, serious, or playful;
- the ***I**nstrumentalities* used to realise the event, including the code, e.g. which language or which language variety, and channel, e.g. whether it is accomplished via vocal versus non-vocal (e.g. oral vs written), and verbal versus non-verbal (e.g. prosodic features vs body movements) means;
- the ***N**orms* of interaction and interpretation of language behaviour including turn-taking patterns;
- the ***G**enre* with which the event is most closely associated, for example, storytelling, gossiping, joking, lecturing, interviewing and so on.

A primary source of data for doing ethnographies of communication is actual accomplishments of the events themselves. These are typically collected via audio and video recordings. During the period of time that the researcher is collecting data, the researcher plays the role of participant-observer. This involves acting as a member of the group whose communicative events are being studied in order to arrive at an in-group member's common-sense understanding of the activities and their significance. Other important sources of data include field notes of the researcher's own experiences and his or her observations of the experiences of the events' participants, interviews with participants, and related public documents and written records.

Moore, L.C. (1999) Language socialization research and French language education in Africa: A Cameroonian case study. *Canadian Modern Language Review*, 56 (2): 329–350. This study is on the multilingual socialisation practices of a community located in the Mandara Mountains, Cameroon, revealing the incongruities between home and schooling practices. The author concludes with suggestions for improving French language pedagogical practices.

Vasquez, O., Pease-Alvarez, L. and Shannon, S. (1994) *Pushing boundaries: Language and culture in a Mexicano community*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. This text presents findings from an ethnographic study of the language socialisation practices of a Mexicano community in California, illustrating how the children of this community learn to make use of their bilingual resources in myriad ways. The authors discuss ways in which educators can use these resources in classrooms to enhance the children's chances of academic success.

## 8.3 Interactional sociolinguistics

As discussed in Chapter 2, interactional sociolinguistics (IS) is an approach to the study of language and culture developed by John Gumperz enabling researchers to look more closely at actual movement in communicative activity. Where an ethnography of communication approach allows researchers to get an idea of the patterns of language use constitutive of a particular communicative event, and the presuppositions held by members of a particular group about the patterns and the event, this approach allows researchers to examine more closely how particular linguistic cues used by participants affect their interpretations of what is happening as a communicative event unfolds.

The focus is on those cues by which 'speakers signal and listeners interpret what the activity is, how semantic content is to be understood and how each sentence relates to what precedes or follows' (Gumperz, 1982a: 131). Of particular concern are interactions where participants with different cultural presuppositions about seemingly familiar events attempt to interact with each other. Such understanding, Gumperz argues, goes beyond what can be gained from doing only ethnographies of communication since they can only tell us what is shared among a group of participants. They cannot interpret communicative and other outcomes arising from cultural differences in language use. The main purpose of IS is therefore to 'show how diversity affects interpretation' (Gumperz, 1999: 459).

This is not to say that IS does not see the value of ethnographies. Quite the contrary, in fact, since the IS approach is predicated on findings arising from ethnographies of communication. That is to say, if researchers are to be able to account for these intercultural differences, they must know the conventional meanings that the cues hold for speakers, that is, how they are typically used to create 'culturally realistic scenes' (Gumperz, 1982a: 160). What IS proposes to do is extend our understanding of the cultural embeddedness of our linguistic actions by demonstrating the consequences that arise from interaction between individuals with different communicative practices for sense making.



Concept 8.1 **Conducting an interactional sociolinguistics study**

An interactional sociolinguistics study involves a two-stage recursive set of procedures.

Stage 1 involves conducting ethnographic research in order to:

(a) become familiar with the local socioculturally constituted environment of the events of interest;

(b) uncover and record recurrent types of communicative events relevant to the research problem at hand;

(c) discover, through participant-observations and interviews with key participants, their expectations and presuppositions for engaging in the activity.

Stage 2 involves analysing recorded events for:

(a) communicative moments of apparent misunderstanding between participants;

(b) prosodic and other cues used by participants to signal their presuppositions and their misunderstandings of each other's intentions at these moments.

Methodologically, IS studies differ slightly from ethnographies of communication in that they involve participants in the data analysis by asking them to view recordings of the event and point out whatever moments in the recordings they wish to respond to. This includes those times when they felt misunderstood or where they felt they might have misunderstood the other during the time the interaction was actually taking place. These moments are then examined to uncover how differences in the use and interpretation of linguistic cues between culturally different participants may have led to unintended consequences in their communicative encounters. The following list of further readings on interactional sociolinguistics includes recent studies utilizing this approach.

### Further reading on interactional sociolinguistics

Auer, P. (ed.) (1998) *Code-switching in conversation: Language, interaction and identity*. London: Routledge. The studies reported in this volume combine methods of analysis from interactional sociolinguistic and conversation analysis approaches to examine the functions of code-switching in a wide variety of international contexts. In addition to reports of empirical data on the bilingual use of English and Cantonese, French and Italian, Danish and Turkish, and Hebrew and English, contributions include theoretical discussions on the nature of code-switching and bilingual conversation.

Auer, P. and DiLuzio, A. (eds) (1992) *The contextualization of language*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins. Contributions to this volume explore the theoretical and empirical aspects of interactional sociolinguistics, and in particular the notion of contextualisation and contextualisation cues, in the analysis of non-verbal communication and prosody.

Couper-Kuhlen, E. & Selting, M. (eds) (1996) *Prosody in conversation: Interactional studies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. The essays in this volume take an interactional sociolinguistics approach to the study of prosody, primarily intonation and rhythm, and the role it plays in everyday conversation. The studies are based on empirical data from English, German and Italian conversations.

Hamilton, H. (1994) *Conversations with an Alzheimer's patient: An interactional sociolinguistic study*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. This book takes an interactional sociolinguistic approach in the longitudinal study of communicative breakdowns that occur in conversations between the author and an elderly female with Alzheimer's disease. In her analysis, the author demonstrates how the patient's communicative abilities and disabilities are related, how they change, and how they are influenced by her own interactional behaviour.

Sarangi, S. and Roberts, C. (eds) (1999) *Talk, work and institutional order: Discourse in medical, mediation, and management settings*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter. Contributions in this volume take an interdisciplinary approach to the examination of talk and its role in creating workplace practices and relationships. Analyses draw primarily from three approaches: ethnography of communication, conversation analysis, and interactional sociolinguistics. Specific contexts include medical practices, health care delivery, management and social care.

## 8.4 Conversation analysis

Conversation analysis (CA) is an approach to the study of talk-in-interaction that developed as a field of study in the 1960s around the same time that Dell Hymes and John Gumperz were developing their approaches. It began in sociology as a reaction to the traditional view of language as a mere reflection of internal dispositions. Like the approaches developed by Hymes and Gumperz, and in contrast to the more traditional view, CA was predicated on a sociocultural perspective of language as social action, and asserted that individual social actors continually produce social order in the contexts of social action. That is, in their interactions with each other, and through the use of various devices or means, individuals continually



produce order and, at the same time, display their understanding of what is taking place with their co-interactants. Thus, then, as now, the primary analytic concern of CA is with the socially constituted means by which such order is produced in interaction (Goodwin and Heritage, 1990).

As with the other approaches, conversation analysis is based on naturally occurring communicative activities. Data are collected via audio and video recordings of interactions, which are then transcribed and analysed for particular resources that participants use to recognise, produce and in other ways coordinate their locally situated actions with each other. The analytic focus of conversation analysis is finely grained as extralinguistic factors such as body position, eye gaze, and paralinguistic features like rhythm, intonation, and speed are taken into account as possibly meaningful resources in addition to linguistic features for bringing order to the interaction. Thus, transcriptions of recorded events are generally quite detailed in terms of what is represented graphically.

Similar to the other analytic approaches discussed in this chapter, the analysis of talk-in-interaction begins with the identification of the phenomenon of interest and the collection of particular instances of the phenomenon. The process of deciding on a unit of analysis is inductive in that the phenomenon of interest is identified via repeated viewings and transcriptions of the recordings. The samples in the collection are then analysed to construct a normative case, the meaning of which is interpreted in light of its use in interaction.

For those who do 'straight-ahead' (Heap, 1997: 223) conversation analysis, the focus is on explicating the various kinds of resources used to produce interactional order in general, and not on the contextually situated uses of the resources by particular individuals or groups. Meaningfulness of utterances is determined in reference to their functions in moving the interaction along and, consequently, there is little interest in collecting data from sources outside the interaction such as participant perspectives (Sanders, 1999). Outside CA proper, however, interest has been extended to the examination of interaction in institutional settings. Incorporating more ethnographically grounded data into their analyses, these studies take a particular interest in examining how participants interactionally enact their organisational roles and, more generally, in demonstrating links between particular resources participants in the interaction use and the larger contexts indexed by the use of the resources.

Such an ethnographically grounded approach to the study of talk-in-interaction is also sometimes referred to as micro-ethnography (Garcez, 1997; Watson-Gegeo, 1997). In comparison to ethnographies of communication, which entail complete descriptions of the various components of communicative events, a micro-ethnographic approach examines social interactions more closely, focusing on the particular means by which they are jointly constructed. Such studies 'may offer a detailed analysis of only one type of

event or even a single instance of an event, perhaps contrasted with a second type of instance found in another context' (Watson-Gegeo, 1997: 138). It is worth noting that because of the overlap in interests in interaction, IS studies are also sometimes referred to as micro-ethnographies (Boxer, 2002).

Both the analytic techniques and findings arising from the multiple and varied studies of interaction have been valuable to those interested in researching language and culture from a sociocultural perspective. These studies make visible the multitude of means including, for example, patterns for turn initiations, turn projections, and self- and other-repair strategies in addition to the more traditional syntactic and semantic means we have at our disposal for sense-making in our communicative activities (Goodwin and Duranti, 1992; Jacoby and Ochs, 1995). Although the studies are generally descriptive in nature, they provide a base for taking a more explanatory approach in terms of being able to link the locally situated actions of individuals to the larger institutional and ideological structures embodied in them.

### Further reading on conversation analysis

Drew, P. and Heritage, J. (eds) (1992) *Talk at work: Interaction in institutional settings*. New York: Cambridge University Press. The studies in this collection apply conversation analysis to the study of professional interaction. The studies cover a wide range of institutional settings, including doctor–patient consultations, legal hearings, and job interviews.

Firth, A. (ed.) (1995) *Discourse of negotiation: Studies of language in the workplace*. Oxford, UK: Pergamon. This collection of essays reports on studies of negotiation discourse that take a micro-ethnographic/conversation analytic approach. The studies examine negotiations in a variety of workplace settings, including the US Federal Trade Commission, management–union meetings, travel agencies, international trading houses in Denmark, Belgium and Australia, and consumer helplines.

Svennevig, J. (2000) *Getting acquainted in conversation: A study of initial interactions*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins. The study presented in this book is a detailed conversation analytic examination of the interactional accomplishment of the event 'getting acquainted' and the particular interactional means by which individuals establish and maintain interpersonal relationships in it.

McHoul and M. Rapley (eds) (2001) *How to analyse talk in institutional settings: A casebook of methods*. London: Continuum International. The contributions to this volume examine interaction in a variety of contexts from three different approaches, including applied conversation analysis. Studies include data from settings such as airline cockpits and medical interviews.

Ten Have, P. (1999) *Doing conversation analysis: A practical guide*. London: Sage. The author presents a comprehensive guide on doing conversation analysis. Included are chapters on methods for collecting data, transcribing recordings, and writing up and publishing results. Most chapters include examples of actual recordings of talk in ordinary settings, and all end with practical exercises and further readings.



## 8.5 Discourse analysis

A fourth approach to the study of language and culture, one that informs both ethnographies of communication and IS studies, is discourse analysis. Its focus is on uncovering the meanings of linguistic resources as used in naturally occurring oral and written texts. The resources of interest can range from single words like 'umm', 'well', and 'ok', which serve to mark particular junctures in the text and relate them to one another, to more complex units like speech acts and their sequential arrangements.

A discourse analysis of language use usually involves three steps. First, particular features for study are identified in the instances of the collected texts. The patterned uses of the feature or features are then identified and described and their meanings interpreted on the basis of how they are used by those whose texts they are. Currently, computerised innovations such as corpus-based linguistics are being employed for detecting patterns of language use across large collections of natural texts. They are useful in that they can provide quantitative descriptions of language patterns in terms of, for example, frequency distributions of single items and the collocation of a number of items. At the same time, since the analyses are based on forms rather than meanings, they limit the kinds of interpretations that can be made about the identified features (Widdowson, 2000).

Recently, in keeping with a sociocultural perspective on language and culture, calls have been made for a discourse analysis that is more explanatory, that is, that seeks to explain individuals' uses of their linguistic resources in terms of larger social, political and historical structures (Candlin, 1987). In tying the analysis of language use to its larger social, historical and political contexts, the goal of explanatory discourse analysis is, in almost all respects, similar to that of the ethnography of communication as developed by Hymes. That is, like ethnography, explanatory discourse analysis seeks to explain how language as used by particular groups and communities both reflects and creates the social actions by which they live their everyday lives. On another level, it seeks to explain how these actions serve to (re)construct particular visions of the world together with particular formations of individual identities and role relationships (Candlin, 1987). Consequently, in addition to samples of naturally occurring texts for analysis, other sources of data such as participant-observations and participant perspectives are drawn on in the analysis.

While the type of texts that are analysed by discourse analysts is quite varied, there has been a recent turn, at least in studies by applied linguists, to narratives as a particularly powerful form of discourse. According to Wortham (2001), telling a story about one's life affords individuals the chance to foreground what they consider significant. In turn, their representations of themselves provide narrators with examples of how the self

**Quote 8.2 Chris Candlin on an explanatory approach to discourse analysis**

An explanatory approach to discourse analysis seeks to demystify the hidden presuppositions and world-views against which meanings are co-constructed by participants. This approach does so by subjecting the use of particular terms, the choice of phonological and lexico-syntactic realizations, the conversational strategies and routines, the speech act values and the understandings by the participants of the norms of interaction and interpretation in encounters, to analysis and critique. In so doing, this approach seeks to illustrate the degree to which our use of language and our meaning-making, as well as our perceptions of role relationships, are determined by the properties of the social situation, its unstated values and interests, its economy; and from this the degree to which such use confirms the status quo and determines the values of the conversational 'goods' which are being exchanged ... It is this attempt to see discoursal features and pragmatic markers characteristic of particular types of encounters ... as being socially and culturally produced, reflective and reproductive of social relationships between participants, and, importantly, between groups, which marks off an explanatory approach to discourse analysis from one which is merely descriptive or even interpretive.

Candlin (1987: 25–6)

*wants* to be. As Wortham (2001: 6) notes, 'when an autobiographical representation becomes compelling enough the narrator acts in accordance with the characteristics foregrounded in the narrative'. Given these interests, current concern with the analysis of narrative is on the linguistics cues that narrators use in the stories that they tell about themselves to construct themselves as particular kinds of individuals, with particular identities as characters within the story and, at the same time, as individuals who take particular stances in relation to the audience as their stories unfold. The following section contains a list of some recent discourse analyses along with some readings on the approach; this is followed by a list of some readings specific to narrative analysis.

## Further reading on discourse analysis

Cameron, D. (2001) *Working with spoken discourse*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. The author of this text provides a comprehensive account of the broad field of discourse analysis. Several current approaches are discussed along with practical strategies for applying the approaches in the analysis of naturally occurring data.

Gee, J.P. (1999) *An introduction to discourse analysis: Theory and method*. London: Routledge. This text presents the theoretical underpinnings of a view of language as social action and a discussion of discourse analysis as a method of research that embodies this view. Included is a discussion of tools of enquiry and strategies for using them in the study of language use.



Lemke, J. (1995) *Textual politics: Discourse and social dynamics*. London: Taylor & Francis. This text takes an explanatory approach to discourse analysis. It begins by examining the role of language in processes of social and cultural change, and the relationship between discourse and the notions of power and ideology. Included as part of the discussion is a review of the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, Michel Foucault and Michael Halliday. The text concludes with a discussion of potential sites of social change.

Schiffrin, D., Tannen, D. and Hamilton, H. (eds) (2001) *The handbook of discourse analysis*. Malden, MA: Blackwell. This collection of essays presents the theoretical foundation of a perspective of discourse as social action and examines some of the more significant methodological issues embodied in discourse analysis. Also included is a wide range of empirical studies of discourse as social and linguistic practice.

Titscher, S., Meyer, M., Wodak, R. and Vetter, E. (2000) *Methods of text and discourse analysis*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. This text provides a comprehensive view of ten approaches to text and discourse analysis. In addition to a detailed description of a particular approach, each chapter provides examples of pertinent studies, a chart with key terms and an annotated list of additional sources of information.

## Further reading on narrative analysis

Atkinson, R. (1998) *The life story interview*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. The focus of this text is on how to use life story interviews in research. Included in the discussion is an overview of the role of narrative in research, and the presentation of a set of guidelines for collecting, transcribing and analysing the interview stories.

Bruner, J.S. (1997) *The culture of education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. This collection of essays by the author presents a sociocultural view of narrative as a means for both representing and creating world views. Bruner uses this concept to examine ways that educational practices, and their accompanying narratives socialise children into particular understandings of themselves and their worlds. Included in the discussion is an examination of the work of scholars such as Lev Vygotsky and Pierre Bourdieu.

Lanehart, S.L. (2002) *Sista, speak! Black women kinfolk talk about language and literacy*. Austin: University of Texas Press. This book examines attitudes about language use through an analysis of narratives as told by women in the author's family. Using data from interviews and written statements by each woman, Lanehart demonstrates how differences in age, educational opportunities, and social circumstances lead to different attitudes towards using language as one goes about living one's everyday life.

Riessman, C.K. (1993) *Narrative analysis*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. This text introduces the use of narratives in research. In addition to a discussion of the concept of narrative, the text examines the advantages of using narratives as a primary source of data in research, and overviews techniques and strategies for both collecting and analysing them.

Wortham, S. (1994) *Acting out participant examples in the classroom*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins. This book reports on a study of a particular pattern of classroom interaction that the author refers to as 'enactment of examples'. In this pattern teachers and students both narrate stories and enact relationships that are embedded in larger social issues. The text contains detailed examples of this pattern in addition to an overview of the methods used to collect and analyse the classroom data.

## 8.6 Critical discourse analysis

An approach to the study of text features that has its roots in discourse analysis is critical discourse analysis (CDA). Similar to an explanatory approach to discourse analysis, the purpose of this approach is to move beyond the textual interpretation of the patterned uses of language to explanation of their ideological underpinnings. What is arguably unique to CDA studies is their concern with how discourse structures are used to enact, confirm, legitimate, reproduce or challenge the dominant ideologies on social problems such as racism, inequality and discrimination.

In bringing together linguistic theory and social theory, CDA seeks to make visible 'how discourse is shaped by relations of power and ideologies, and the constructive effects that discourse has upon social identities, social relations and systems of knowledge and belief, none of which is normally apparent to discourse participants' (Fairclough, 1992: 12). Moreover, those who engage in CDA do so with the explicit aim of compelling broad social changes by the force of their findings. That is, the intention behind CDA is, as Mey (1985: 374) suggests, 'to define, and describe such language as can assist at least some people in preventing some social injustice in everyday life, and in changing some societal structures to the better'.

A very recent variation of CDA is what Ruth Wodak and her colleagues (Wodak et al., 1999) have termed discourse-historical methodology. Its purpose is to situate texts in their historical contexts and explore the ways in which they change through time. The more general aim of this method is similar to that of CDA in that it seeks to 'unmask ideologically permeated and often obscured structures of power, political control, and dominance, as well as strategies of discriminatory inclusion and exclusion in language use' (ibid.: 8). The following section contains a list of recent studies taking a critical approach to discourse analysis along with some readings on the approach itself.

### Further reading on critical discourse analysis

Chouliaraki, L. and Fairclough, N. (2000) *Rethinking critical discourse analysis*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. This text presents a comprehensive overview of the theoretical assumptions about language and social life embedded in a critical discourse analytic approach to the study of language use. The authors ground their discussion in contemporary social theory and clarify the relationship of this particular approach to other types of social analysis.

Collins, C. (1999) *Language, ideology and social consciousness: Developing a sociohistorical approach*. Aldershot, UK: Ashgate. The author presents an approach to a critical analysis of language use grounded in a sociohistorical perspective of language as found in the work of L.S. Vygotsky and V.N. Voloshinov. In the early chapters, the author outlines his theoretical framework, which he then applies in later chapters to critical analyses of language use from three particular contexts. Also included is a critique of the critical discourse approach to research.

Levett, A., Kottler, A., Burman, E. and Parker, I. (eds) (1997) *Culture, power and difference: Discourse analysis in South Africa*. New York: St Martin's Press. This volume contains essays that examine the sociopolitics of language use in South Africa in its transition to democracy. Studies provide critical perspectives on a wide range of social and political issues as they are discursively realized in a variety of social contexts. Methodological issues with conducting critical discourse analysis are also addressed.

Parker, I. (ed.) (1999) *Critical textwork: An introduction to varieties of discourse and analysis*. London: Taylor & Francis. This collection of essays is an introduction to critical discourse analysis. The different studies examine the use of symbolic resources in reflecting and creating social context. In addition to critical analyses of standard oral and written texts such as conversations and newspaper articles, there are studies of advertising, comics and sign language systems.

Wodak, R. and Meyer, M. (eds) (2002) *Methods of critical discourse analysis*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. This book provides a comprehensive introduction to critical discourse analysis. It includes chapters that lay out the theoretical underpinnings of the approach, describe methods of data collection and analysis, and introduce some of the leading figures in this field of research.



## 8.7 Microgenetic approach

The last approach to be discussed differs from the others in that the concern is specifically with the study of language *learning*. In keeping with a sociocultural perspective, the goal of such research is to understand human action (Cole, 1996; Tomasello, 1999; Vygotsky, 1978, 1981; Wertsch, 1994, 1998). However, unlike traditional methods, which seek to study language behaviour in its final form, and apart from its contexts of learning, the concern here is with studying communicative action in the very processes of change, since, as Vygotsky and others have asserted, the only way to understand human action in its final form is by analysing its development.

**Quote 8.3 Vygotsky on the significance of the historical method for studying development**

To encompass in research the process of a given thing's development in all its phases and changes – from birth to death – fundamentally means to discover its nature, its essence, for 'it is only in movement that a body shows what it is'. Thus, the historical study of behavior is not an auxiliary aspect of theoretical study, but rather forms its very base.

Vygotsky (1978: 64–5)

Vygotsky posited four dimensions of historical, or developmental, study of human action: *phylogenesis*, which considers the development of human action in the evolution of the human species; *sociocultural history*, which considers its development over time in a particular culture; *ontogenesis*, which considers its development over the life of an individual; and *microgenesis*, which considers the development of human action over the duration of particular interactions in specific social settings. This last dimension is what studies of learning are centrally about.

Microgenetic studies (Siegler and Crowley, 1991; Wertsch and Stone, 1978) are small-scale, longitudinal studies in which learners' behaviours are observed to identify changes, and the specific contextual conditions of these changes. Specific methods involve a high density of observations of action over a specified period of time. Data sources include repeated video- and audio-recordings of the naturally occurring communicative event in which change is anticipated and, in some cases, other ethnographic data such as participant perceptions of their involvement. The goal is to link specific processes of learning with both quantitative and qualitative aspects of change. Crucial to this method is not so much the length of time over which change is observed, but the density of observations relative to the rate of change.

Another significant feature of this method is its use of both qualitative and quantitative measures for understanding change. To analyse change, the events are transcribed and coded in terms of the specific actions being investigated. Qualitative analyses of the longitudinal data can uncover the changing shapes of the linguistic actions as they happen. Quantitative measures such as frequency counts, sign tests, and other non-parametric measures, can also be employed to detect whether any changes in the observed actions are significant from one point to another, and how the changes relate to specific aspects of the event.

Most current studies using microgenetic methods are found in the field of psychology. Their primary concern has been with the development of conceptual knowledge and cognitive strategies (Siegler and Crowley, 1991; National Research Council, 1999). Only recently have such methods been used to study the learning of language. Because of the relative newness of this approach to the study of language learning in applied linguistics, it would be useful to describe in detail one recent study of foreign language learning utilising microgenetic methods.

Kim and Hall (2002) report on an investigation of the connection between the participation of a small group of native-speaking Korean children in an interactive book-reading programme and their development of particular linguistic and conversational resources in English. Twice a week for four months four children engaged in book-reading sessions with one of the researchers. Each of the sessions lasted 30 minutes.



During the first 20 minutes of the session, the children engaged in an 'interactive reading' session with the researcher using a book depicting a school-based story. Each session involved having the researcher read the story aloud to the children while actively involving them in the reading. He engaged the children by asking them questions and encouraging contributions from the children. He also expanded upon their comments and, in other ways, drew their attention to the story and the illustrations. During the last 10 minutes of each session, the children were encouraged to role-play the scenes depicted in the book read to them during the first 20 minutes.

To detect changes over time in the children's language use in the role-plays, the researchers used microgenetic methods. They first collected video-recordings of the role-play sessions in which the children created and participated in the pretend situations over the four-month period. The data were then transcribed and coded for several linguistic features including: vocabulary (including the number of words and number of school-specific vocabulary words), utterances (the number of utterances); talk management actions (including number of initiations, number of elaborations, number of conclusions and number of formulaic expressions), and meaning management actions (including number of self-corrections and number of other corrections). Quantitative changes in the children's use of the four features over the four months were measured using the sign test, a non-parametric statistic; and to determine whether the changes were related to the books used in the reading sessions, chi-square tests were performed.

It was found that the children's use of the different linguistic resources in English increased over the four-month period. It was also found that many of the increases were related to the particular books used. For example, although all seven books used in the study had a similar school theme and setting, the children used more utterances and talk management features in role-plays about two books in particular than they had for the other five books. Data from interviews with the children revealed that they found these books more enjoyable than the others. They reported that the books were funnier and more connected to their personal interests, and thus they were more willing to assume the roles depicted in these stories.

While these findings are interesting, what is important for our purposes is the value of microgenetic methods in allowing the researchers to understand the children's changing language behaviour in a way that more traditional 'snap-shot' methods cannot. The collection of repeated recordings of the children's language use over time, and data on the participants' perceptions of their involvement along with the use of both qualitative and quantitative analytic measures to document change, allowed

the researchers to see not only whether change occurred, but what the behaviours looked like as they were undergoing change. Furthermore, they were able to link specific changes to specific books used in the reading sessions and to understand some of the basis for these links. In addition to documenting the learning of communicative resources, microgenetic methods are useful for studying other aspects of individual change such as identity formation and participation status (e.g. Penuel and Wertsch, 1995). A list of some recent readings about the microgenetic approach can be found in the following section.

### Further reading on the microgenetic approach

Catan, L. (1986) The dynamic display of process: Historical development and contemporary uses of the microgenetic method. *Human development*, 29: 252–63. This article provides a brief, historical account of microgenetic methods in which the author argues for a slight but significant distinction between micro-*genetic* and micro-*developmental* methods for the study of behaviour.

Donato, R. and McCormick, D. (1994) A sociocultural perspective on language learning strategies: The role of mediation. *The Modern Language Journal*, 78(4): 453–64. This reports on a study of language learner development of learning strategies over the course of one semester. The authors used microgenetic methods to investigate the kinds of strategies the learners used, the shapes they took as the learners moved through the semester and the contextual conditions of their development.

Takahashi, E., Austin, T. and Morimoto, Y. (2000) Social interaction and language development in a FLES classroom. In J.K Hall and L.S. Verplaetse (eds), *Second and foreign language learning through classroom interaction* (pp. 139–59). Mahweh, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum. The authors report on a study of Japanese language learning among elementary school-aged children who were native speakers of English. Microgenetic methods were used to track changes over a two-year period in the children's participation patterns and language use in their interactions with the teacher.

Rojas-Drummond, S. (2000) Guided participation, discourse and the construction of knowledge in Mexican classrooms. In H. Cowie and G. van der Aalsvoort (eds), *Social interaction in learning and instruction: The meaning of discourse for the construction of knowledge* (pp. 193–213). Amsterdam: Pergamon. The research reported on here is concerned with interaction and learning in maths classrooms. Microgenetic methods were used in the investigation of the particular discursive strategies teachers used to guide students' participation in their instructional activities in and across classrooms.

Hall, J.K. (1998) Differential teacher attention to student utterances: The construction of different opportunities for learning in the IRF. *Linguistics and Education*, 9(3): 287–311. In this study, the author used micro developmental methods to investigate the shape of high school learners' of Spanish participation patterns in a particular instructional activity, changes in these patterns over one semester, and the consequences of these changes in terms of Spanish language development of four individual learners.



## 8.8 Summary

The six approaches presented in this chapter have informed a great deal of research in applied linguistics and I suspect they will continue to do so. Those who are new to the field, or at least new to research on language, culture and learning, are encouraged to seek out additional sources for guidance and information on these and other approaches. The more famil-
iar we are with options for undertaking investigation, the more likely we are to formulate well-designed research plans whose methods can help to answer the questions we are asking.