

## Approaches to Research on Discourse

### MA Social Reserach module

#### Module Outline

This short course addresses the discursive turn in contemporary social science research. It adopts a broad definition of 'discourse' which includes an interactionist view of discourse as 'situated talk' *and* the critical, post-structuralist view of discourse as 'ways of understanding and constituting the social world'. The first view of discourse emerged as part of the broad interactional turn which took place as new fields of social science, such as conversation analysis, interactional sociolinguistics and micro-ethnography were being established (see Short Course on *Linguistic Ethnography*). Within this tradition of work, context was not taken as given but as being constituted in and through everyday discourse practices and interactional routines and therefore continually open to change and negotiation. Meanings were seen as being situated, moment by moment, in the ongoing flow of talk-in-interaction. The second view of discourse has been developed, more recently, by researchers concerned with the ways in which power relations are played out within institutions. In this body of work, the term 'discourse' is often used in the plural, and discourses are seen as socially constitutive systems of meaning which are embedded in particular social, institutional and historical contexts, and "as different ways of structuring areas of knowledge and social practice" (Fairclough, 1992:3) They are also viewed as sources of power – the power to define boundaries and categories and to construct objects and social subjects. Contemporary studies of discourse sometimes combine these two broad views of discourse. They do so in diverse ways and offer different means of conceptualising the relationship between ideological and interactional processes. The multimodal nature of communication in contemporary social life is also becoming a focus of intense research interest and has led researchers to combine perspectives from discourse studies and semiotics. This short course will focus primarily on the second view of discourse outlined above and will illustrate some of the ways in which this view has informed research practice.

#### Learning Outcomes

By the end of the course, you should aim to be able to:

- Critically evaluate different approaches to the study of discourse and multimodality
- Assess the appropriacy of particular approaches to the design of your own research (or similar projects)
- Demonstrate an understanding of how approaches might be combined
- Apply a particular approach to the analysis of your own data (or some other data)

#### Course Assessment

A 3,000 word assignment on one of the following topics: Provide a critical evaluation of one approach to the study of discourse; Provide a critical review of approaches to the study of multimodality; Outline a rationale for incorporating one of the approaches covered in the course into the design of a particular project (this could be your own research project or a similar project); Present an analysis of a particular set of data (spoken or written, monolingual or bilingual), using one of the approaches covered in the course.