2 Discourses and social languages

2.1 Building things through language

Language has a magical property: when we speak or write we craft what we have to say to fit the situation or context in which we are communicating. But, at the same time, how we speak or write creates that very situation or context. It seems, then, that we fit our language to a situation or context that our language, in turn, helped to create in the first place.

This is rather like the “chicken and egg” question: Which comes first? The situation we’re in (e.g. a committee meeting)? Or the language we use (our committee ways of talking and interacting)? Is this a “committee meeting” because we are speaking and acting this way, or are we speaking and acting this way because this is a committee meeting? After all, if we did not speak and act in certain ways, committees could not exist; but then, if institutions, committees, and committee meetings didn’t already exist, speaking and acting this way would be nonsense. The answer here is that this magical property is real and language and institutions “bootstrap” each other into existence in a reciprocal process through time.

Another way to look at the matter is this: we always actively use spoken and written language to create or build the world of activities (e.g. committee meetings) and institutions (committees) around us. However, thanks to the workings of history and culture, we often do this in more or less routine ways. These routines make activities and institutions, like committees and committee meetings, seem to (and, in that sense, actually) exist apart from language and action in the here and now. None the less, these activities and institutions have to be continuously and actively rebuilt in the here and now. This is what accounts for change, transformation, and the power of language-in-action in the world.

We continually and actively build and rebuild our worlds not just through language, but through language used in tandem with actions, interactions, non-linguistic symbol systems, objects, tools, technologies, and distinctive ways of thinking, valuing, feeling, and believing. Sometimes what we build is quite similar to what we have built before; sometimes it is not. But language-in-action is always and everywhere an active building process.
Whenever we speak or write, we always and simultaneously construct or build six things or six areas of “reality”:

1. **The meaning and value of aspects of the material world:** I enter a plain, square room, and speak and act in a certain way (e.g. like someone about to run a meeting), and, low and behold, where I sit becomes the “front” of the room.

2. **Activities:** We talk and act in one way and we are engaged in formally opening a committee meeting; we talk and act in another way and we are engaged in “chit-chat” before the official start of the meeting.

3. **Identities and relationships:** I talk and act in one way one moment and I am speaking and acting as “chair” of the committee; the next moment I speak and talk in a different way and I am speaking and acting as one peer/colleague speaking to another.

4. **Politics (the distribution of social goods):** I talk and act in such a way that a visibly angry male in a committee meeting (perhaps it’s me!) is “standing his ground on principle,” but a visibly angry female is “hysterical.”

5. **Connections:** I talk and act so as to make what I am saying here and now in this committee meeting about whether we should admit more minority students connected to or relevant to (or, on the other hand, not connected to or relevant to) what I said last week about my fears of losing my job given the new government’s turn to the right.

6. **Semiotics (what and how different symbol systems and different forms of knowledge “count”):** I talk and act so as to make the knowledge and language of lawyers relevant (privileged), or not, over “everyday language” or over “non-lawyerly academic language” in our committee discussion of facilitating the admission of more minority students.

In Chapter 5 I will elaborate these “building tasks” and their relevance for discourse analysis. But in the next three chapters, I want to develop several “tools of inquiry” (ways of looking at the world of talk and interaction) that will help us study how these building tasks are carried out and with what social and political consequences. The tools of inquiry I will introduce in this chapter are primarily relevant to how we (together with others) build identities and activities and recognize the identities and activities that are being built around us. However, the tools of inquiry introduced here are most certainly caught up with all the other building tasks above, as well, as we will see progressively in this book. The tools to be discussed in this chapter are:

- “**Situated identities,**” that is, different identities or social positions we enact and recognize in different settings.
- “**Social languages,**” that is, different styles of language that we use to enact and recognize different identities in different settings; different social languages
also allow us to engage in all the other building tasks above (in different ways, building different sorts of things).

c. “Discourses” with a capital “D,” that is, different ways in which we humans integrate language with non-language “stuff,” such as different ways of thinking, acting, interacting, valuing, feeling, believing, and using symbols, tools, and objects in the right places and at the right times so as to enact and recognize different identities and activities, give the material world certain meanings, distribute social goods in a certain way, make certain sorts of meaningful connections in our experience, and privilege certain symbol systems and ways of knowing over others (i.e. carry out all the building tasks above).

d. “Conversations” with a capital “C,” that is, long-running and important themes or motifs that have been the focus of a variety of different texts and interactions (in different social languages and Discourses) through a significant stretch of time and across an array of institutions.

2.2 Whos and whats

When you speak or write anything, you use the resources of English to project yourself as a certain kind of person, a different kind in different circumstances. You also project yourself as engaged in a certain kind of activity, a different kind in different circumstances. If I have no idea who you are and what you are doing, then I cannot make sense of what you have said, written, or done.

You project a different identity at a formal dinner party than you do at the family dinner table. And, though these are both dinner, they are none the less different activities. The fact that people have differential access to different identities and activities, connected to different sorts of status and social goods, is a root source of inequality in society. Intervening in such matters can be a contribution to social justice. Since different identities and activities are enacted in and through language, the study of language is integrally connected to matters of equity and justice.

An oral or written “utterance” has meaning, then, only if and when it communicates a who and a what (Wieder and Pratt 1990a). What I mean by a “who” is a socially-situated identity, the “kind of person” one is seeking to be and enact here and now. What I mean by a “what” is a socially-situated activity that the utterance helps to constitute.

Lots of interesting complications can set in when we think about identity enacted in and through language. Whos can be multiple and they need not always be people. The President’s Press Secretary can issue an utterance that is, in fact, authored by a speech writer and authorized (and even claimed) by the President. In this case, the utterance communicates a sort of overlapping and compound who. The Press Secretary, even if she is directly quoting the speech writer, must inflect the remark
with her own voice. In turn, the speech writer is both “mimicking” the President’s “voice” and creating an identity for him.

Not just individuals, but also institutions, through the “anonymous” texts and products they circulate, can author or issue “utterances.” For example, we will see below that the warning on an aspirin bottle actually communicates multiple *whos*. An utterance can be authored, authorized by, or issued by a group or a single individual.

Finally, we can point out that *whos* and *whats* are not really discrete and separable. You are *who* you are partly through *what* you are doing and *what* you are doing is partly recognized for what it is by *who* is doing it. So it is better, in fact, to say that utterances communicate an integrated, though often multiple or “heteroglossic,” *who-doing-what*.

### 2.3 “Real Indians”

Though I have focused on language, it is important to see that making visible and recognizable *who* we are and *what* we are doing always requires more than language. It requires, as well, that we act, think, value, and interact in ways that together with language render *who* we are and *what* we are doing recognizable to others (and ourselves). In fact, to be a particular *who* and to pull off a particular *what* requires that we act, value, interact, and use language *in sync with* or *in coordination with* other people and with various objects (“props”) in appropriate locations and at appropriate times.

To see this wider notion of language as integrated with “other stuff” (other people, objects, values, times and places), we will briefly consider Wieder and Pratt’s (1990a, b) fascinating work on how Native Americans (from a variety of different groups, though no claim is made that the following is true of all Native American groups) recognize each other as “really Indian.” Wieder and Pratt point out that real Indians “refer to persons who are ‘really Indian’ in just those words with regularity and standardization” (1990a: 48). Wieder and Pratt’s work will also make clear how the identities (the *whos*) we take on are flexibly negotiated in actual contexts of practice.

The term “real Indian” is, of course, an “insiders’ term.” The fact that it is used by some Native Americans in enacting their own identity work does not license non-Native Americans to use the term. Thus, though it may clutter the text, I will below always place the term “real Indian” in scare quotes to make clear that I am talking about the term and not claiming that I have the “right” to actually use it of anyone. In any case, however I might use it, it certainly would do different work than it does for the Native Americans we will discuss below. Finally, let me say that I am not discussing Native Americans here because I think they are “esoteric.” In fact, I am using this example, because I think it is a clear and dramatic example of what *we all* do all the time, though in different ways.
The problem of “recognition and being recognized” is very consequential and problematic for Native Americans. While in order to be considered a “real Indian,” one must be able to make some claims to kinship with others who are recognized as “real Indians,” this by no means settles the matter. People with such (biological) ties can fail to get recognized as a “real Indian,” and people of mixed kinship can be so recognized.

Being a “real Indian” is not something one can simply be. Rather, it is something that one becomes in and through the doing of it, that is, in carrying out the actual performance itself. Though one must have certain kinship ties to get in the “game,” beyond this entry criterion, there is no being (once and for all) a “real Indian,” rather there is only doing being-or-becoming-a-“real-Indian.” If one does not continue to “practice” being a “real Indian,” one ceases to be one.

Finally, doing being-and-becoming-a-“real-Indian” is not something that one can do all by oneself. It requires the participation of others. One cannot be a “real Indian” unless one appropriately recognizes “real Indians” and gets recognized by others as a “real Indian” in the practices of doing being-and-becoming-a-“real-Indian.” Being a “real Indian” also requires appropriate accompanying objects (props), times, and places.

There are a multitude of ways one can do being-and-becoming-a-“real-Indian.” Some of these are (following Wieder and Pratt 1990a): “Real Indians” prefer to avoid conversation with strangers, Native American or otherwise. They cannot be related to one another as “mere acquaintances,” as some “non-Indians” might put it. So, for “real Indians,” any conversation they do have with a stranger who may turn out to be a “real Indian” will, in the discovery of the other’s “Indianness,” establish substantial obligations between the conversational partners just through the mutual acknowledgment that they are “Indians” and that they are now no longer strangers to one another.

In their search for the other’s “real Indianness” and in their display of their own “Indianness,” “real Indians” frequently engage in a distinctive form of verbal sparring. By correctly responding to and correctly engaging in this sparring, which “Indians” call “razzing,” each participant further establishes cultural competency in the eyes of the other.

“Real Indians” manage face-to-face relations with others in such a way that they appear to be in agreement with them (or, at least, they do not overtly disagree); they are modest and “fit in.” They show accord and harmony and are reserved about their own interests, skills, attainments, and positions. “Real Indians” understand that they should not elevate themselves over other “real Indians.” And they understand that the complex system of obligations they have to kin and other “real Indians” takes priority over those contractual obligations and pursuit of self-interest that some “non-Indians” prize so highly.

“Real Indians” must be competent in “doing their part” in participating in conversations that begin with the participants exchanging greetings and other
amenities and then lapsing into extended periods of silence. They must know that neither they nor the others have an obligation to speak – that silence on the part of all conversants is permissible.

When they are among “Indians,” “real Indians” must also be able to perform in the roles of “student” and “teacher” and be able to recognize the behaviors appropriate to these roles. These roles are brought into play exclusively when the appropriate occasion arises for transmitting cultural knowledge (i.e. things pertinent to being a “real Indian”). Although many “non-Indians” find it proper to ask questions of someone who is instructing them, “Indians” regard questions in such a situation as being inattentive, rude, insolent, and so forth. The person who has taken the role of “student” shows attentiveness by avoiding eye contact and by being silent. The teaching situation, then, as a witnessed monologue, lacks the dialogical features that characterize some Western instruction.

While the above sort of information gives us something of the flavor of what sorts of things one must do and say to get recognized as a “real Indian,” such information can lead to a bad mistake. It can sound as if the above features are necessary and sufficient criteria for doing being-and-becoming-a-“real-Indian.” But this is not true.

These features are not a test that can be or ever is administered all at once, and once and for all, to determine who is or is not a “real Indian.” Rather, the circumstances under which these features are employed by “Indians” emerge over the course of a developing history among groups of people. They are employed always in the context of actual situations, and at different times in the life history of groups of people. The ways in which the judgment, “He (or she) is (or is not) a ‘real Indian’,,” is embedded within situations that motivate it make such judgments intrinsically provisional. Those now recognized can spoil their acceptance or have it spoiled and those not now accepted can have another chance, even when others are reluctant to extend it.

The same thing applies, in fact, in regard to many other social identities, not just being “a real Indian.” There are no once and for all tests for who is a “real” feminist, gang member, patriot, humanist, cutting-edge scientist, “yuppie,” or “regular” at the local bar. These matters are settled provisionally and continuously, in practice, as part and parcel of shared histories and on-going activities. When I was young, my community certainly had (very rigid) tests through which we continually, always provisionally, and sometimes contentiously, displayed and recognized who was and was not a “real Catholic” (versus being a “Catholic in name only” or being a non-Catholic). That community, and those tests, have, over the least several decades, changed radically, however much we then viewed them as static and eternal.

Different social identities (different whos) may seriously conflict with one another. For instance, Scollon and Scollon (1981) point out that for the Native Americans they studied (Athabaskans in Canada and the U.S.), writing essays, a practice
common in school, can constitute a crisis in identity. To produce an essay requires the Athabaskan to produce a major self-display, which is appropriate to Athabaskans only when a person is in a position of dominance in relation to the audience (in the case of school, the teacher, not the student).

Furthermore, in essayist prose, the audience and the author are “fictionalized” (not really me and you, but decontextualized and rather generic readers and writers) and the text is decontextualized from specific social networks and relationships. Where the relationship of the communicants is decontextualized and unknown, Athabaskans prefer silence.

The paradox of prose for Athabaskans, the Scollons point out, is that if it is communication between known author and audience it is contextualized and compatible with Athabaskan values, but not good essayist prose. To the extent that it becomes decontextualized and thus good essayist prose, it becomes uncharacteristic of Athabaskans to seek to communicate. What is required to do and be an Athabaskan is in large part mutually exclusive with what it is required to do and be a writer of school-based essayist prose. This doesn’t mean Athabaskans cannot do both (remember, we are all multiple), it simply means that they may face very real conflicts in terms of values and identity. And, as the Scollons point out, many other groups of people have similar or related “identity issues” with essayist literacy.

2.4 Discourses (with a big “D”)

I want to argue that the problem of “recognition and being recognized” is very consequential, not only for Native Americans, but for all of us all the time. And, as we saw above, making visible and recognizable who we are and what we are doing always involves a great deal more than “just language.” It involves acting-interacting-thinking-valuing-talking-(sometimes writing-reading) in the “appropriate way” with the “appropriate” props at the “appropriate” times in the “appropriate” places.

Such socially accepted associations among ways of using language, of thinking, valuing, acting, and interacting, in the “right” places and at the “right” times with the “right” objects (associations that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or “social network”), I will refer to as “Discourses,” with a capital “D” (Gee 1990b, 1992, 1996; see also Bourdieu 1990b; Foucault 1985). I will reserve the word “discourse,” with a little “d,” to mean language-in-use or stretches of language (like conversations or stories). “Big D” Discourses are always language plus “other stuff.” There are innumerable Discourses in any modern, technological, urban-based society: for example, (enacting) being something as general as a type of African-American or Anglo-Australian or something as specific as being a type of modern British young second-generation affluent Sikh woman.
Being a type of middle-class American, factory worker, or executive, doctor or hospital patient, teacher, administrator, or student, student of physics or of literature, member of a club or street gang, regular at the local bar, or, as we saw earlier, “real Indian” are all Discourses.

The key to Discourses is “recognition.” If you put language, action, interaction, values, beliefs, symbols, objects, tools, and places together in such a way that others recognize you as a particular type of who (identity) engaged in a particular type of what (activity) here and now, then you have pulled off a Discourse (and thereby continued it through history, if only for a while longer). Whatever you have done must be similar enough to other performances to be recognizable. However, if it is different enough from what has gone before, but still recognizable, it can simultaneously change and transform Discourses. If it is not recognizable, then you’re not “in” the Discourse.

Discourses are always embedded in a medley of social institutions, and often involve various “props” like books and magazines of various sorts, laboratories, classrooms, buildings of various sorts, various technologies, and a myriad of other objects from sewing needles (for sewing circles) through birds (for bird watchers) to basketball courts and basketballs (for basketball players). Think of all the words, symbols, deeds, objects, clothes, and tools you need to coordinate in the right way at the right time and place to “pull off” (or recognize someone as) being a cutting-edge particle physicist or a Los Angeles Latino street gang member or a sensitive high-culture humanist (of old).

It is sometimes helpful to think about social and political issues as if it is not just us humans who are talking and interacting with each other, but rather, the Discourses we represent and enact, and for which we are “carriers.” The Discourses we enact existed before each of us came on the scene and most of them will exist long after we have left the scene. Discourses, through our words and deeds, carry on conversations with each other through history, and, in doing so, form human history.

Think, for instance, of the long-running and ever-changing “conversation” in the U.S. and Canada between the Discourses of “being an Indian” and “being an Anglo” or of the different, but equally long-running “conversation” in New Zealand between “being a Maori” and “being an Anglo” (or, for that matter, think of the long-running conversation between “being a British Anglo” and “being an American Anglo”). Think of the long-running and ever-changing “conversation” between creationists and biologists. Think of the long-running and ever-changing “conversation” in Los Angeles between African-American teenage gang members and the L.A. police (some of whom, for instance, are leading experts, even academically speaking, on the “grammar” of gang graffiti, which varies significantly, by the way, between African-American gangs and Latino gangs). Intriguingly, we humans are very often unaware of the history of these conversations, and thus, in a deep sense, not fully aware of what we mean when we act and talk.
When we discussed being a “real Indian,” we argued that “knowing how” to be a “real Indian” rests on one’s being able to “be in sync with other ‘real Indians’” and with objects (e.g. the material items of the culture) in the appropriate times and places. Recent studies of science suggest much the same thing is true for scientists.

For example, these studies argue the physics experimental physicists “know” is, in large part, not in their heads. Rather, it is spread out (distributed), inscribed in (and often trapped in) apparatus, symbolic systems, books, papers, and journals, institutions, habits of bodies, routines of practice, and other people (Latour 1987; Traweek 1988). Each domain of practice, each scientific Discourse – for example, a specific area within physics or biology – attunes actions, expressions, objects, and people (the scientists themselves) so that they become “workable” in relation to each other (Knorr Cetina 1992). They are “in sync.”

Just as there were verbal and non-verbal ways to be a “real Indian,” there are ways to be a “real experimental physicist.” They are both (being an experimental physicist or being a “real Indian”) ways with words, feelings, values, beliefs, emotions, people, actions, things, tools, and places that allow us to display and recognize characteristic whos doing characteristic whats. They are both, then, Discourses.

The scientist’s “know how” is the ability to coordinate and be coordinated by constellations of expressions, actions, objects, and people. In a sense, the scientist is both an actor (coordinating other people and various things, tools, technologies, and symbol systems) and a patient (being coordinated by other people and various things, tools, technologies, and symbol systems). Scientists become agent-patients “in sync with,” “linked with,” “in association with,” “in coordination with,” however we want to put it, other “actants” (adapting a term from Callon and Latour 1992), such as particular forms of language, other people, objects (e.g. scientific equipment, atoms, molecules, or birds), places (e.g. labs or fields), and non-verbal practices.

In the end a Discourse is a “dance” that exists in the abstract as a coordinated pattern of words, deeds, values, beliefs, symbols, tools, objects, times, and places and in the here and now as a performance that is recognizable as just such a coordination. Like a dance, the performance here and now is never exactly the same. It all comes down, often, to what the “masters of the dance” will allow to be recognized or will be forced to recognize as a possible instantiation of the dance.

### 2.5 Discourses are not “units” with clear boundaries

The notion of Discourses will be important throughout this book. It is important, therefore, to make some points clear to avoid some common misunderstandings. Imagine I freeze a moment of thought, talk, action, or interaction for you, in the way in which a projector can freeze a piece of film. To make sense of that moment, you
have to recognize the identities and activities involved in it. Perhaps, for this frozen moment you can’t do so, so you move the film back and forward enough until you can make such a recognition judgment.

“Oh, now I see,” you say, “it’s a ‘real Indian’ razzing another ‘real Indian’,” or “it’s a radical feminist berating a male for a crass male remark” or “it’s a laboratory physicist orienting colleagues to a graph” or “it’s a first-grader in Ms. X’s class starting a sharing time story.” Perhaps, if you now move the film backwards and forwards a bit more, you will change your judgments a little, a lot, or not at all.

Perhaps, you aren’t sure. You and I even argue about the matter. You say that “It’s a skinhead sending intimidating glances to a passing adult on the street” and I say, “No, it’s just a wanna-be trying to act tough.” You say, “It’s a modern classroom teacher leading a discussion” and I say, “No, it’s a traditional teacher giving a lecture in the guise of a series of known-answer questions.”

This is what I call “recognition work.” People engage in such work when they try to make visible to others (and to themselves, as well) who they are and what they are doing. People engage in such work when they try to recognize others for who they are and what they are doing. People engage in such work within interactions, moment by moment. They engage in such work when they reflect on their interactions later. They engage in such work, as well, when they try to understand human interaction as researchers, practitioners, theoreticians, or interventionists.

Sometimes such recognition work is conscious, sometimes it is not. Sometimes people have labels they can articulate for the whos and whats they recognize, sometimes they don’t. Sometimes they fight over the labels, sometimes they don’t. And the labels change over time.

Thanks to the fact that we humans engage, inside and outside interactions, in recognition work, Discourses exist in the world. For example, there is a way of being a kindergarten student in Ms. X’s class with its associated activities and ways with words, deeds, and things. Ms. X, her students, her classroom, with its objects and artifacts, and characteristic activities, are all in the Discourse she and her students create. These same people and things, of course, can be in other Discourses as well.

Recognition work and Discourses out in the world go hand-in-hand. Ms. X and her students engage in recognition work, for example, a certain sort of sharing time story isn’t recognized as “acceptable” in this class, another type is. That recognition work creates a Discourse, that is, ways with words, actions, beliefs, emotions, values, interactions, people, objects, tools, and technologies that come to constitute “being and doing a student in Ms. X’s class.” In turn, this Discourse renders recognition work possible and meaningful. It’s another “chicken and egg” question, then: Which comes first, recognition work or Discourses? Neither. They are reflexively related, such that each creates the other.
Discourses have no discrete boundaries because people are always, in history, creating new Discourses, changing old ones, and contesting and pushing the boundaries of Discourses. You, an African-American male, speak and act here and now in an attempt to get recognized as a “new capitalist manager coaching a project team.” If you get recognized as such, then your performance is in the Discourse of new capitalist management. If you don’t, it isn’t.

If your performance has been influenced, intentionally or not, by another one of your Discourses (say, your membership in the Discourse of doing and being a jazz fan or your membership in a certain version of African-American culture as a Discourse), and it gets recognized in the new capitalist management Discourse, then you have just, at least for here and now, “infected” one Discourse with another and widened what “counts” in the new capitalist management Discourse. You pushed the boundaries. In another time and place they may get narrowed.

You can get several of your Discourses recognized all at once. You (thinking of one of my esteemed colleagues at a university where I previously worked) “pull off” being here and now, in a class or meeting, for example, “a British, twice-migrant, globally oriented, traditional and modern, fashionable, female, Sikh, American Professor of cultural studies and feminist postmodern anthropology” by weaving strands of your multiple Discourses together. If this sort of thing gets enacted and recognized enough, by enough people, then it will become not multiple strands of multiple Discourses interleaved, but a single Discourse whose hybridity may ultimately be forgotten. The point is not how we “count” Discourses; the point is the performance, negotiation, and recognition work that goes into creating, sustaining, and transforming them, and the role of language (always with other things) in this process.

Let me make several other brief, but important points about Discourses:

1. Discourses can split into two or more Discourses. For example, medieval “natural philosophy” eventually split into philosophy, physics and other sciences.
2. Two or more Discourses can meld together. For example, after the movie Colors came out some years ago, mixed Latino, African-American, and white gangs emerged. Prior to that, Latinos, African-Americans, and whites had quite separate ways of being and doing gangs, as they still do in the case of segregated gangs.
3. It can be problematic whether a Discourse today is or is not the same as one in the past. For example, modern medicine bears little resemblance to medicine before the nineteenth century, but perhaps enough to draw some important parallels for some purposes, though not for others.
4. New Discourses emerge and old ones die all the time. For example, in Palmdale, California (a desert community outside Los Angeles), and I assume other places as well, an anti-racist skinhead Discourse is dying because people,
including the police, tend to confuse its members with a quite separate, but similar looking, racist Neo-Nazi skinhead Discourse.

5. Discourses are always defined in relationships of complicity and contestation with other Discourses, and so they change when other Discourses in a society emerge or die. For example, the emergence of a “new male” Discourse in the 1970s (ways of doing and being a “new male”) happened in response to various gender-based Discourses (e.g. various sorts of feminism) and class-based Discourses (the baby-boom middle class was too big for all young males to stay in it, so those who “made it” needed to mark their difference from those who did not), and, in turn, changed the meanings and actions of these other Discourses.

6. Discourses need, by no means, be “grand” or large scale. I used to eat regularly at a restaurant with a long bar. Among the regulars, there were two different Discourses at opposite ends of the bar, that is, ways of being and doing that end of the bar. One involved young men and women and a lot of male-dominated sexual bantering; the other involved older people and lots of hard luck stories. The restaurant assigned different bartenders to each end (always a young female at the young end) and many of the bartenders could fully articulate the Discourse at their end of the bar and their role in it.

7. Discourses can be hybrids of other Discourses. For example, the school yards of many urban middle and high schools are places where teenagers of different ethnic groups come together and engage in what I have elsewhere called a “borderland Discourse” of doing and being urban teenager peers (Gee 1996), when they cannot safely go into each other’s neighborhoods and when they each have their own neighborhood peer-based Discourses. The borderland Discourse is quite manifestly a mixture of the various neighborhood peer Discourses, with some emergent properties of its own.

8. There are limitless Discourses and no way to count them, both because new ones, even quite non-grand ones, can always emerge and because boundaries are always contestable.

One way to think about the role of Discourses is this: Imagine you have a giant map. Each Discourse is represented on the map like a country, but with movable boundaries that you can slide around a bit. You place the map on top of any language, action, or interaction you participate in or want to think about. You move the boundaries of the Discourse areas on the map around in negotiation with others or as your reflections change.

The map gives you a way to understand what you are seeing in relationship to the full set of Discourses in an institution (maybe it is just a map of all the Discourses in a given community, business, school or university) or the society as a whole (if it’s a map of the whole society), at least as far as you know it. Wherever on the map you line up the current thought, action, interaction, or language, it is immediately
placed in relation to all the other countries (Discourses) on the map (though “fuzzily,” since you can move the boundaries around or others can try to make you do so).

Such a map is a Discourse grid against which you understand your own and others’ thought, language, action, and interaction. It is an ever changing map with which you can engage in recognition work. It is, as it exists across people and social groups, both the origin and the product of the reality of actual Discourses in the world, aligning and disaligning themselves with each other through history.

Understanding is always relative to the whole grid or map. The complex relationships among Discourses, which we can imagine as intricate criss-crossing lines connecting the various Discourse-areas on the map in complex positive and negative ways, define and demarcate individual Discourses. Your own Discourse grid is the limit of your understanding, and it is the fundamental job of education to give people bigger and better Discourse maps, ones that reflect the working of Discourses throughout society, the world, and history in relationship to each other and to the learner.

So Discourses are out in the world and history as coordinations (“a dance”) of people, places, times, actions, interactions, verbal and non-verbal expression, symbols, things, tools, and technologies that betoken certain identities and associated activities. Thus, they are material realities. But Discourses also exist as the work we do to get people and things recognized in certain ways and not others, and they exist as maps that constitute our understandings. They are, then, social practices and mental entities, as well as material realities.

2.6 A heteroglossic aspirin bottle

I want now to return to how whos and whats are communicated in language (keeping in mind that language alone is rarely enough and is always put together with “other stuff” to pull off a Discourse). It is time, then, to turn to examples in order to make my points about whos-doing-whats more concrete. Consider, then, the warning on my aspirin bottle (Gee 1996), reprinted below (italics and capitals are on the warning):

Warnings: Children and teenagers should not use this medication for chicken pox or flu symptoms before a doctor is consulted about Reye Syndrome, a rare but serious illness reported to be associated with aspirin. Keep this and all drugs out of the reach of children. In case of accidental overdose, seek professional assistance or contact a poison control center immediately. As with any drug, if you are pregnant or nursing a baby, seek the advice of a health professional before using this product. IT IS ESPECIALLY IMPORTANT NOT TO USE ASPIRIN DURING THE LAST 3 MONTHS OF PREGNANCY UNLESS SPECIFICALLY DIRECTED TO DO SO BY
A doctor because it may cause problems in the unborn child or complications during delivery. See carton for arthritis use and Important Notice.

My interpretation of this text is that there are two who-doing-whats in this warning, and they are interleaved. The first is made up of the following sentences:

Children and teenagers should not use this medication for chicken pox or flu symptoms before a doctor is consulted about Reye Syndrome, a rare but serious illness reported to be associated with aspirin. It is especially important not to use aspirin during the last 3 months of pregnancy unless specifically directed to do so by a doctor because it may cause problems in the unborn child or complications during delivery.

Here things are referred to quite specifically (“children or teenagers,” “this medication,” “chicken pox,” “flu,” “Reye Syndrome,” “aspirin,” “last 3 months,” “unborn child,” “delivery”), doctors are called “doctor,” and matters are treated emphatically (italics, capitals, “should not,” “rare but serious,” “especially important,” “specifically directed”).

The second who-doing-what is made up of the following sentences, placed in the middle of the other two:

Keep this and all drugs out of the reach of children. In case of accidental overdose, seek professional assistance or contact a poison control center immediately. As with any drug, if you are pregnant or nursing a baby, seek the advice of a health professional before using this product.

Here things are referred to more generally and generically (“this and all drugs,” “any drug,” and “this product,” rather than “this medication” and “aspirin”; “children” rather than “children and teenagers,” “pregnant” rather than “last 3 months of pregnancy”), doctors are not mentioned, rather the health profession is referred to more generally (“professional assistance,” “poison control center,” “health professional”), and matters are treated less stridently with the exception of that “immediately” (small print, “keep out of reach,” “accidental overdose,” “seek . . . assistance,” “seek advice,” rather than “should not” and “important not to use”).

These two who-doing-whats “feel” different. They are authorized and issued by different “voices” to different purposes and effects. The first speaks with a lawyerly voice responding to specific court cases; the second speaks with the official voice of a caring, but authoritatively knowledgeable company trying to avoid anyone thinking that aspirin in particular is a potentially harmful drug. Of course, this second who-doing-what partly contradicts the first. By the way, the second who-
doing-what on the aspirin bottle used to be the only warning on the bottle (with the order of the sentences a bit different).

This warning, like all utterances, reflects the company it has kept, or, to put the matter another way, it reflects a history that has given rise to it. In this case, presumably, the new sterner, more direct who-doing-what was added to the more general and avuncular one because the company got sued over things like Reye Syndrome.

The warning on the aspirin bottle is heteroglossic. That is, it is “double-voiced,” since it interleaves two different who-doing-whats together. Of course, in different cases, this sort of interleaving could be much more intricate, with the two (or more) who-doing-whats more fully integrated, and harder to tease apart.

2.7 Social languages

There is another term that it is useful in place of the cumbersome phrase “who-doing-what,” at least as far as the language aspects of “who-doing-whats” are concerned (remembering that language is caught up with “other stuff” in Discourses). This term is “social language” (Gee 1996: ch. 4; Bakhtin 1986). Each of the who-doing-whats we saw on the aspirin bottle is linguistically expressed in different “social languages.” All languages, like English or French, are composed of many (a great many) different social languages. Social languages are what we learn and what we speak.

Keep in mind that “social languages” and “Discourses” are terms for different things. I will use the term “social languages” to talk about the role of language in Discourses. But as I said above, Discourses always involve more than language. They always involve coordinating language with ways of acting, interacting, valuing, believing, feeling, and with bodies, clothes, non-linguistic symbols, objects, tools, technologies, times, and places.

Let me give a couple of examples of social languages at work, beyond the example of the two different social languages in the warning on the aspirin bottle, examples I have used over the years as particularly clear instances of different social languages (e.g. Gee 1996). Consider, for instance, the following case of an upper-middle-class, Anglo-American young woman named “Jane,” in her twenties, who was attending one of my courses on language and communication. The course was discussing different social languages and, during the discussion, Jane claimed that she herself did not use different social languages in different contexts, but rather, was consistent from context to context. In fact, to do otherwise, she said, would be “hypocritical,” a failure to “be oneself.”

In order to support her claim that she did not switch her style of speaking in different contexts and for different conversational partners, Jane decided to record
herself talking to her parents and to her boyfriend. In both cases, she decided to discuss a story the class had discussed earlier, so as to be sure that, in both contexts, she was talking about the same thing.

In the story, a character named Abigail wants to get across a river to see her true love, Gregory. A river boat captain (Roger) says he will take her only if she consents to sleep with him. In desperation to see Gregory, Abigail agrees to do so. But when she arrives and tells Gregory what she has done, he disowns her and sends her away. There is more to the story, but this is enough for our purposes here. Students in my class had been asked to rank order the characters in the story from the most offensive to the least.

In explaining to her parents why she thought Gregory was the worst (least moral) character in the story, the young woman said the following:

> Well, when I thought about it, I don’t know, it seemed to me that Gregory should be the most offensive. He showed no understanding for Abigail, when she told him what she was forced to do. He was callous. He was hypocritical, in the sense that he professed to love her, then acted like that.

Earlier, in her discussion with her boyfriend, in an informal setting, she had also explained why she thought Gregory was the worst character. In this context she said:

> What an ass that guy was, you know, her boyfriend. I should hope, if I ever did that to see you, you would shoot the guy. He uses her and he says he loves her. Roger never lies, you know what I mean?

It was clear – even to Jane – that she had used two very different forms of language. The differences between Jane’s two social languages are everywhere apparent in the two texts.

To her parents, she carefully hedges her claims (“I don’t know,” “it seemed to me”); to her boyfriend, she makes her claims straight out. To her boyfriend, she uses terms like “ass” and “guy,” while to her parents she uses more formal terms like “offensive,” “understanding,” “callous,” “hypocritical” and “professed.” She also uses more formal sentence structure to her parents (“it seemed to me that . . .,” “He showed no understanding for Abigail, when . . .,” “He was hypocritical in the sense that . . .”) than she does to her boyfriend (“. . . that guy, you know, her boyfriend,” “Roger never lies, you know what I mean?”).

Jane repeatedly addresses her boyfriend as “you,” thereby noting his social involvement as a listener, but does not directly address her parents in this way. In talking to her boyfriend, she leaves several points to be inferred, points that she spells out more explicitly to her parents (e.g. her boyfriend must infer that Gregory
is being accused of being a hypocrite from the information that though Roger is bad, at least he does not lie, which Gregory did in claiming to love Abigail).

All in all, Jane appears to use more “school-like” language to her parents. Her language to them requires less inferencing on their part and distances them as listeners from social and emotional involvement with what she is saying, while stressing, perhaps, their cognitive involvement and their judgment of her and her “intelligence.” Her language to her boyfriend, on the other hand, stresses social and affective involvement, solidarity, and co-participation in meaning making.

This young woman is making visible and recognizable two different versions of who she is and what she is doing. In one case she is “a dutiful and intelligent daughter having dinner with her proud parents” and in the other case she is “a girl friend being intimate with her boyfriend.” Of course, I should add, that while people like Jane may talk at dinner this way to their parents, not all people do; there are other identities one can take on for one’s parents, other social languages one can speak to them. And, indeed, there may well be others that Jane would use to her parents in different settings.

Let me give one more example of social languages at work, an example taken from Greg Myers’ work (1990). Biologists, and other scientists, write differently in professional journals than they do in popular science magazines. These two different ways of writing do different things and display different identities. The popular science article is not merely a “translation” or “simplification” of the professional article.

To see this, consider the two extracts below, the first from a professional journal, the second from a popular science magazine, both written by the same biologist on the same topic (Myers 1990: 150):

Experiments show that *Heliconius* butterflies are less likely to ovipost on host plants that possess eggs or egg-like structures. These egg-mimics are an unambiguous example of a plant trait evolved in response to a host-restricted group of insect herbivores.

*(Professional journal)*

*Heliconius* butterflies lay their eggs on *Passiflora* vines. In defense the vines seem to have evolved fake eggs that make it look to the butterflies as if eggs have already been laid on them.

*(Popular science)*

The first extract, from a professional scientific journal, is about the *conceptual structure* of a specific *theory* within the scientific *discipline* of biology. The subject of the initial sentence is “experiments,” a *methodological* tool in natural science. The subject of the next sentence is “these egg-mimics”: note how plant-parts are named, not in terms of the plant itself, but in terms of the role they play in a particular *theory* of natural selection and evolution, namely “coevolution” of predator and
Discourses and social languages

prey (that is, the theory that predator and prey evolve together by shaping each other). Note also, in this regard, the earlier “host plants” in the preceding sentence, rather than the “vines” of the popular passage.

In the second sentence, the butterflies are referred to as “a host-restricted group of insect herbivores,” which points simultaneously to an aspect of scientific methodology (like “experiments” did) and to the logic of a theory (like “egg-mimics” did). Any scientist arguing for the theory of co-evolution faces the difficulty of demonstrating a causal connection between a particular plant characteristic and a particular predator when most plants have so many different sorts of animals attacking them. A central methodological technique to overcome this problem is to study plant groups (like *Passiflora* vines) that are preyed on by only one or a few predators (in this case, *Heliconius* butterflies). “Host-restricted group of insect herbivores,” then, refers to both the relationship between plant and insect that is at the heart of the theory of coevolution and to the methodological technique of picking plants and insects that are restricted to each other so as to “control” for other sorts of interactions.

The first passage, then, is concerned with scientific methodology and a particular theoretical perspective on evolution. On the other hand, the second extract, from a popular science magazine, is not about methodology and theory, but about animals in nature. The butterflies are the subject of the first sentence and the vine is the subject of the second. Further, the butterflies and the vine are labeled as such, not in terms of their role in a particular theory.

The second passage is a story about the struggles of insects and plants that are transparently open to the trained gaze of the scientist. Furthermore, the plant and insect become “intentional” actors in the drama: the plants act in their own “defense” and things “look” a certain way to the insects, they are “deceived” by appearances as humans sometimes are.

These two examples replicate in the present what, in fact, is an historical difference. In the history of biology, the scientist’s relationship with nature gradually changed from telling stories about direct observations of nature to carrying out complex experiments to test complex theories (Bazerman 1989). Myers (1990) argues that professional science is now concerned with the expert “management of uncertainty and complexity” and popular science with the general assurance that the world is knowable by and directly accessible to experts.

The need to “manage uncertainty” was created, in part, by the fact that mounting “observations” of nature led scientists not to consensus, but to growing disagreement as to how to describe and explain such observations (Shapin and Schaffer 1985). This problem led, in turn, to the need to convince the public that such uncertainty did not damage the scientist’s claim to professional expertise or the ultimate “knowability” of the world.
This example lets us see, then, not just that ways with words are connected to different *whos* (here the experimenter/theoretician versus the careful observer of nature) and *whats* (the professional contribution to science and the popularization of it), but that they are always acquired within and licensed by specific social and historically shaped practices representing the *values* and *interests* of distinctive groups of people.

So, it is clear now, I hope, that in using language what is at stake are *whos-doing-whats*. But, you cannot be any old *who* you want to. You cannot engage in any old *what* you want to. That is to say that *whos* and *whats* are creations in history and change in history, as we have just seen in the examples from biology.

### 2.8 Two grammars

Each social language has its own distinctive grammar. However, two different sorts of grammars are important to social languages, only one of which we ever think to study formally in school. One grammar is the traditional set of units like nouns, verbs, inflections, phrases and clauses. These are real enough, though quite inadequately described in traditional school grammars. Let’s call this “grammar one.”

The other – less studied, but more important – grammar is the “rules” by which grammatical units like nouns and verbs, phrases and clauses, are used to create *patterns* which signal or “index” characteristic *whos-doing-whats*-within-*Discourses*. That is, we speakers and writers design our oral or written utterances to have patterns in them in virtue of which interpreters can attribute situated identities and specific activities to us and our utterances. We will call this “grammar two.”

These patterns, I hasten to add, are not fancy devices of postmodern social science. They have been named in linguistics for a long time. Linguists call them “collocational patterns.” This means that various sorts of grammatical devices “co-locate” with each other. The patterns I am trying to name here are “co-relations” (correlations) among many grammatical devices, from different “levels” of grammar one. These correlations, in turn, also co-relate to (coordinate with) other non-language “stuff” to constitute (for historical, i.e. *conventional* reasons) *whos-doing-whats*-within-*Discourses*.

For example, in Jane’s utterance to her boyfriend, “What an ass that guy was, you know, her boyfriend,” note how informal terms like “ass” and “guy,” the vague reference “that guy,” the informal parenthetical device “you know,” and the informal syntactic device of “right dislocation” (i.e. letting the phrase “her boyfriend” hang out at the end of the sentence) all pattern together to signal that this utterance is in an informal social language used to achieve solidarity.
The situation here is much like choosing clothes that go together in such a way that they communicate that we are engaged in a certain activity or are taking up a certain style connected to such activities. For example, consider how thongs, bathing suit, tank top, shades, and sun hat “co-locate” together to “signal” to us things like outdoor and water activities and the situated identities we take up in such situations.

2.9 Grammar and conversations

Let me give you another example of grammar one being used to create grammar two, that is, to create co-locational patterns in virtue of which we recognize a specific social language and its concomitant social identities and activities. Consider the sentence below (adapted from Halliday and Martin 1993: 77):

1 Lung cancer death rates are clearly associated with an increase in smoking.

A whole bevy of linguistic features mark this sentence as part of a distinctive academic social language (though without more connected text we can’t actually tell exactly which one). Some of these are: a heavy subject (“lung cancer death rates”), deverbal nouns (“increase,” “smoking”), a complex compound noun (“lung cancer death rates”), a “low transitive” relational predicate (“are associated with”), passive or passive-like voice (“are associated”), the absence of agency (no mention of who does the associating), an abstract noun (“rates”), and an assertive modifier to the verb (“clearly”).

No single grammatical feature marks the social language of this sentence. Rather, all these features (and a great many more if we took a larger stretch of text, including many discourse-level features) form a distinctive configuration (a correlation or, better, co-relation) that marks the social language. This co-relational (co-locational) pattern is part of the grammar of this social language (in the sense of “grammar two”).

I hasten to point out that the configuration of features that mark a social language are too complex and too situated in the specific context they are helping to create (after all, there is no such thing as a “general social science context”) to be open to much generalized and rote learning. Linguistic relationships like these do not exist, and are not learned, outside the distinctive social practices (whats) of which they are an integral part. They are part and parcel of the very “voice” or “identity” (whos) of people who speak and write and think and act and value and live that way (e.g. as a social scientist) for a given time and place. To learn such relationships is part of what it means to learn to recognize the very social context one is in (and helping to create). This is not to say there is no role here for overt instruction (there
Discourses and social languages

is). It is only to say that there is no way we can leave out immersion in situated practices if we want to teach people new social languages.

It is sometimes said that what distinguishes “informal” social languages like the one Jane used to her boyfriend from more “formal” ones characteristic of literacy and “literate talk,” like the social language Jane used to her parents, or the smoking example on p. 30, is that, in the “informal” case, “context” determines meaning and you just have to have been there to understand what was being said. In the more “formal” cases, it is held that the words and sentences mean in a more explicit, less contextual way. In fact, it is sometimes said that such language is “decontextualized.” Some people in education claim that what many minority and lower socio-economic children who do not succeed in school fail to know is how to use such “decontextualized language.”

All this is seriously in error, and in ways that not only mislead us, but actually damage some people (e.g. the children just referred to). Consider sentence 1 again. This sentence is no more explicit than informal language. It is no less contextualized. It is simply inexplicit and contextualized in a different way.

Though we tend to think of writing, at least academic writing, as clear, unambiguous, and explicit in comparison to speech, sentence 1, in fact, has at least 112 different meanings! What is odder still is that anyone reading sentence 1 (at least anyone reading this book) hits on only one of these meanings (or but one of a select few) without any overt awareness that the other 111 meanings are perfectly possible.

There are theories in psycholinguistics that claim that what happens in a case like sentence 1 is that we unconsciously consider all 112 possible meanings and rule out all but one, but we do this so fast and so below the level of consciousness that we are completely unaware of it. Be that as it may, how can sentence 1 have so many meanings and why do we all, none the less, hit on one and, in fact, exactly the same one?

This fact is due to the grammar (in the grammar one sense) of the sentence. The subject of sentence 1 (“Lung cancer death rates”) is a “nominalization” made up of a compound noun. Nominalizations are like trash compactors: they allow one to take a lot of information – indeed, a whole sentence’s worth of information – and compact it into a compound word or a phrase. One can then insert this compacted information into another sentence (thereby making bigger and bigger sentences). The trouble is this: once one has made the compacted item (the nominalization), it is hard to tell what information exactly went into it. Just like the compacted trash in the trash compactor, you can’t always tell exactly what’s in it.

“Lung cancer death rates” could be a compaction of any of the following more expanded pieces of information:

2a [lung cancer] [death rates] = rates (number) of people dying from lung cancer = how many people die from lung cancer
The first two meanings (2a/b) parse the phrase “lung cancer death rates” as “lung-cancer (a disease) death-rates,” that is “death-rates from lung-cancer,” where “rates” can mean number of people dying or the speed of their death from the disease. The second two meanings (2c/d) parse the phrase “lung cancer death rates” as “lung cancer-death-rates,” that is “cancer-death-rates for lungs,” where, once again, “rates” can mean number of (this time) lungs dying from cancer or the speed with which they are dying from cancer. This way of parsing the phrase is analogous to the most obvious reading of “pet cancer death rates” (i.e. “cancer-death-rates for pets,” that is, how many/how fast pets are dying from cancer). Of course, everyone reading this paper interpreted “lung cancer death rates” to be a compaction of 2a. Our question is, why?

Consider now the verbal phrase “are clearly associated with” in sentence 1. Such rather “colorless” relational predicates are typical of certain social languages. Such verbal expressions are ambiguous in two respects. First, we cannot tell whether “associated with” indicates a relationship of causation or just correlation. Thus, does sentence 1 say that one thing causes another (e.g. smoking causes cancer) or just that one thing is correlated with another (smoking and cancer are found together, but, perhaps, something else causes both of them)? Second, even if we take “associated with” to mean cause, we still cannot tell what causes what. You and I may know, in fact, that smoking causes cancer, but sentence 1 can perfectly mean that lung cancer death rates lead to increased smoking. “Perhaps,” as Halliday remarks, “people are so upset by fear of lung cancer that they need to smoke more in order to calm their nerves” (Halliday and Martin 1993: 77–8). It is even possible that the writer did not want to commit to a choice between cause and correlate, or to a choice between smoking causing cancer or fear of cancer causing smoking. This gives us at least the following meaning possibilities for the verbal phrase “are clearly associated with”:

3a cause
3b caused by
3c correlated with
3d writer does not want to commit herself

Now, let’s finish with the phrase “increased smoking.” This is another nominalization, compacting information. Does it mean “people smoke more” (smokers are increasing the amount they smoke), or “more people smoke” (new smokers are
being added to the list of smokers), or is it a combination of the two, meaning “more people smoke more”?

We can also ask, in regard to the death rates and the increased smoking taken together, if the people who are increasing their smoking (whether old smokers or new ones) are the people who are dying from lung cancer, or whether other people dying as well (e.g. people who don’t smoke, but, perhaps, are “associated with” smokers). Finally, we can ask of the sentence as a whole, whether it is representing a “real” situation (“because more people are smoking more people are dying”) or just a hypothetical one (“if more people were to smoke we know more people would die”)? This gives us at least seven more meaning possibilities:

4a  increased smoking = people smoke more
4b  increased smoking = more people smoke
4c  increased smoking = more people smoke more
4d  the same people are smoking and dying
4e  the people smoking and dying are not all the same
4f  the situation being talked about is real (because)
4g  the situation being talked about is hypothetical (if)

We now have considered four possible meanings for the subject (“lung cancer death rates”), four possible meanings for the verbal phrase (“are clearly associated with”) and seven possibilities for the complement (“increased smoking”). Like an old-fashioned Chinese menu, you can take one from list A and another from list B and yet another from list C and get a specific combination of meanings. This gives us four times four times seven possibilities, that is, 112 different possible meanings.

All of these meanings are perfectly allowed by the grammar of sentence 1 in the “grammar one” sense of grammar. And, in fact, there are other possibilities I have not discussed, e.g. taking “rates” to mean “monetary costs” or “lung cancer death rates” to be the rates at which lung cancer is dying. And yet – here’s our mystery again – everyone reading this paper in a micro second hit on just one of these many meanings and the same one (or, at worst, considered a very few of the possibilities). Why?

The answer to the mystery I am discussing here may be perfectly obvious to you, but I want to suggest that, none the less, it is important for how we view language and language learning. We all hit on only one (and the same one) of the 112 meanings because we have all been part of – we have all been privy to – the ongoing discussion or conversation in our society about smoking, disease, tobacco companies, contested research findings, warnings on cartons, ads that entice teens to smoke, and so on and so forth.

Given this conversation as background, sentence 1 has one meaning. Without that conversation – with only the grammar of English in one’s head – the sentence has more than 112 meanings. Obviously, however important grammar is, the conversation is more important. It leaves open one meaning (or a small number of
Discourses and social languages

possibilities, like allowing that sentence 1 also covers people getting lung cancer from secondary smoke).

A more technical way to put this point is this: meaning is not merely a matter of decoding grammar, it is also, and more importantly, a matter of knowing which of the many inferences that one can draw from an utterance are relevant (Sperber and Wilson 1986). And relevance is a matter deeply tied to context, point of view, and culture. One knows what counts for a given group of people at a given time and place as “relevant” by having been privy to certain “conversations” those people have heretofore had. If there had been a major conversation about environmentally induced lung cancer in a nervous society, then sentence 1 could perfectly well have been taken to mean that the prevalence of lung cancer is causing many more people to turn to smoking to calm their nerves (2a + 3a + 4b).

So, we have concluded, we speak and write not in English alone, but in specific social languages. The utterances of these social languages have meaning – or, at least, the meanings they are taken to have – thanks to being embedded in specific social conversations. Though I have established these points in regard to a single sentence (sentence 1), I take them to be generally true.

To teach someone the meaning of sentence 1 – or any sentence for that matter – is to embed them in the conversational sea in which sentence 1 swims. To teach someone the sort of social language in which sentences like sentence 1 occur is to embed them in the conversations that have recruited (and which, in turn, continually reproduce) that social language.

2.10 Big “C” Conversations: Conversation among Discourses

Now it is time to become clearer about what I mean by “conversation.” The word “conversation,” as I am using it here, can be misleading. We tend to think of conversations as “just words.” But the sorts of conversations I am talking about involve a lot more than words; they involve, in fact, Discourses. It is better, perhaps, to call them “Conversations” with a “big C,” since they are better viewed as (historic) conversations between and among Discourses, not just among individual people. Think, for instance, as we mentioned above, of the long-running, historic Conversation between biology and creationism, or between the Los Angeles police department and Latino street gangs.

More than people, and more than language, are involved in Conversations. They involve, as well, at least the following three non-verbal things:

1. controversy, that is, “sides” we can identify as constituting a debate (Billig 1987);
2. values and ways of thinking connected to the debate; and
3. the “symbolic” value of objects and institutions that are what we might call non-verbal participants in the Conversation (Latour 1987).

Let me give you an example of what I am trying to get at here. It is fashionable today for businesses to announce (in “mission statements”) their “core values” in an attempt to create a particular company “culture” (Collins and Porras 1994, examples below are from pp. 68–9). For instance, the announced core values of Johnson & Johnson, a large pharmaceutical company, include “The company exists to alleviate pain and disease” and “Individual opportunity and reward based on merit,” as well as several others.

One might wonder, then, what the core values of a cigarette company might be. Given the Conversations that most of us are familiar with – about the U.S. and its history in this case, as well as about smoking – we can almost predict what they will be. For example, the espoused core values of Philip Morris, a large company which sells cigarettes among a great many other products, include “The right to personal freedom of choice (to smoke, to buy whatever one wants) is worth defending,” “Winning – being the best and beating others,” and “Encouraging individual initiative,” as well as (in a statement similar to one of Johnson & Johnson’s statements) “Opportunity to achieve based on merit, not gender, race, or class.”

We all readily connect Philip Morris’s core value statements to themes of American individualism and freedom. Note how the values of “individual initiative” and “reward for merit,” which are part of the core values of both Johnson & Johnson and Philip Morris, take on a different coloring in the two cases. In the first case, they take on a humanistic coloring and in the other the coloring of “every man for himself.” This coloring is the effect of our knowledge of the two sides to the “smoking Conversation” in which, we all know, individual freedom is pitted against social responsibility.

Note, then, here how values, beliefs, and objects play a role in the sorts of Conversations I am talking about. We know that in this Conversation some people will hold values and beliefs consistent with expressions about individualism, freedom, the “American way,” and so forth, while others will express values and beliefs consistent with the rights of others, social responsibility, and protecting people from harm, even harm caused by their own desires. In turn, these two value and belief orientations can be historically tied to much wider dichotomies centering around beliefs about the responsibilities and the role of governments.

Furthermore, within this Conversation, an object like a cigarette or an institution like a tobacco company, or the act of smoking itself, takes on meanings – symbolic values – within the Conversation, but dichotomous meanings. Smoking can be seen as an addiction, an expression of freedom, or a lack of caring about others. The point is that those familiar with the Conversation know, just as they can select the
meaning of sentence 1 out of 112 possibilities, the possible meanings of cigarettes, tobacco companies, and smoking.

When we teach literature or physics, or anything else, for that matter, we index a multiple, but specific world of Conversations, though it is no easy matter in classrooms to get most of these Conversations going “for real.” When we teach language – whether this be French, English as Second Language, composition, basic skills, literacy, or what have you – we face in the purest and hardest form the question of what Conversation or Conversations make words and phrases meaningful and relevant here and now.

The themes and values that enter into Conversations circulate in a multitude of texts and media and have done so in the past. They are the products of historic meaning making within Discourses. Of course, people today often know these themes and values without knowing the historical events that helped create or sustain them in the past and pass them down to us today.

For example, throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century in Massachusetts, courts were asked to return escaped slaves to their Southern “owners” (von Frank 1998). These court battles, and the accompanying controversies in newspapers and public meetings, engaged two distinctive Discourses among several others (for example, several Discourses connected to Black churches and to Massachusetts’ significant nineteenth-century population of free Black people, some of them professionals, such as ministers, doctors, and lawyers – note that it is hard to know what to call these people, they were of African descent, born in the U.S., of all different colors, but were not full citizens).

One Discourse, connected to people like Emerson and Thoreau, championed freedom, personal responsibility, and morality as constituting a “higher law” than the law of states, the federal government, or the courts. They argued and fought, not only to not return the slaves, but to disobey the court and the federal officials seeking to enforce its mandate. The other Discourse, heavily associated with nationally-oriented political and business elites, championed the rule of law at the expense of either the slave’s freedom or one’s own personal conscience.

These two Discourses were, by no means, just “statements” and “beliefs.” There were, for example, distinctive ways, in mind, body, and social practice, to mark oneself in nineteenth-century Massachusetts as a “Transcendentalist” (i.e. a follower of Emerson and his colleagues) and to engage in social activities seen as part and parcel of this identity.

Many people today have no knowledge of the debates over escaped slaves in Massachusetts and nationally in the nineteenth century (though these debates, of course, helped lead to the Civil War). However, these debates sustained, transformed, and handed down themes and values that are quite recognizable as parts of ongoing
Discourses and social languages

Conversations in the mid-twentieth century (e.g. in the Civil Rights Movement) and today.

Of course, I must hasten to add, again, that a number of other important Discourses played a significant role in the escaped slave cases in Massachusetts. Blacks were part of some integrated Discourses, as well as their own distinctive Discourses. Furthermore, all these Discourses interacted with each other, in complex relations of alliance and contestation, with some important overlaps between Discourses (e.g. between the Transcendentalists and John Brown’s distinctive and violent Discourse in regard to slavery and abolition).

Because people are often unaware of historical clashes among Discourses, it is often easier to study Conversations, rather than Discourses directly, though it is always important and interesting to uncover the historical antecedents of today’s Conversations. Conversations are the precipitates of what we will call, in subsequent chapters, “situated meanings” and “cultural models” as these have circulated with and across Discourses in history.

The way in which I have used the term “Conversation” here is a use that is sometimes covered in other work by the term “discourse.” People who use the term “discourse” this way mean something like this: the range of things that count as “appropriately” “sayable” and “meaning-able,” in terms of (oral or written) words, symbols, images, and things, at a given time and place, or within a given institution, set of institutions, or society, in regard to a given topic or theme (e.g. schools, women’s health, smoking, children, prisons, etc.). Such a use of the term “discourse” or “Conversation” (the term I will use) concentrates on themes and topics as they are “appropriately” “discussible” within and across Discourses at a particular time in history, across a particular historical period, within a given institution or set of them, or within a particular society or across several of them (Foucault 1985).

2.11 Social languages and Discourses as tools of inquiry

In this chapter, I have treated the terms “social languages,” “Discourses,” and “Conversations” realistically. That is, I have spoken about them as things that exist in the mind and in the world. And indeed, this is, I believe, both true and the easiest way to grasp what they mean and how and why they are significant for discourse analysis.

But it is important to realize that, in the end, these terms are ultimately our ways as theoreticians and analysts of talking about, and, thus, constructing and construing the world. And it is in this guise that I am primarily interested in them. They are “tools of inquiry.” “Social languages,” “Discourses,” and “Conversations” are “thinking devices” that guide us to ask certain sorts of questions. Faced with a piece of oral or written language, we ask the following sorts of questions:
What social languages are involved? What sorts of “grammar two” patterns indicate this? Are different social languages mixed? How so?

What socially situated identities and activities do these social languages enact?

What Discourse or Discourses are involved? How is “stuff” other than language (“mind stuff” and “emotional stuff” and “world stuff” and “interactional stuff” and non-language symbol systems, etc.) relevant in indicating socially situated identities and activities?

What sort of performance and recognition work (negotiations and struggles) has gone on in interactions over this language? What are the actual or possible social, institutional, and political consequences of this work?

In considering this language, what sorts of relationships among different Discourses are involved (institutionally, in society, or historically)? How are different Discourses aligned or in contention here?

What Conversations are relevant to understanding this language and to what Conversations does it contribute (institutionally, in society, or historically)?

Note: The term “Discourse” (with a big “D”) is meant to cover important aspects of what others have called: discourses (Foucault 1966, 1969, 1973, 1977, 1978, 1980, 1984, 1985); communities of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991); cultural communities (Clark 1996); discourse communities (Berkenkotter and Huckin 1995; Miller 1984); distributed knowledge or distributed systems (Hutchins 1995; Lave 1988); thought collectives (Fleck 1979); practices (Barton and Hamilton 1998; Bourdieu 1977, 1985, 1990a, b; Heidegger 1962); cultures (Geertz 1973, 1983); activity systems (Engestrom 1987, 1990; Leont’ev 1981; Wertsch 1998); actor-actant networks (Callon and Latour 1992; Latour 1987); and (one interpretation of) “forms of life” (Wittgenstein 1958). Discourses, for me, crucially involve:

- situated identities;
- ways of performing and recognizing characteristic identities and activities;
- ways of coordinating and getting coordinated by other people, things, tools, technologies, symbol systems, places, and times;

A given Discourse can involve multiple identities (e.g. a teacher, Ms. X, and her kindergarten students take on different situated identities, and different, but related, ones in diverse activities within the “Ms. X-and-her-students classroom Discourse,” provided that Ms. X has, in fact, created a coherent Discourse in and around her
classroom). Some people dislike the term “situated identity” and prefer, instead, something like “(social) position” or “subjectivity” (they tend to reserve the term “identity” for a sense of self that is relatively continuous and “fixed” over time). I use the term “identity” (or, to be specific, “socially-situated identity”) for the multiple identities we take on in different practices and contexts and would use the term “core identity” for whatever continuous and relatively “fixed” sense of self underlies our contextually shifting multiple identities.
3 Situated meanings and cultural models

3.1 Meaning

The primary tools of inquiry we will discuss in this chapter are “situated meanings” and “cultural models.” Both of these involve ways of looking at how speakers and writers give language specific meanings within specific situations. I will argue in this chapter that the meanings of words are not stable and general. Rather, words have multiple and ever changing meanings created for and adapted to specific contexts of use. At the same time, the meanings of words are integrally linked to social and cultural groups in ways that transcend individual minds.

This chapter will also discuss a perspective on the human mind at work in the social world. Traditional views of the mind in cognitive science have tended to view the human mind as a “rule following” device that very often works in quite abstract and general ways. The perspective taken here views the human mind as a “pattern recognizing” device that works primarily by storing experiences and finding patterns in those experiences, patterns that often stay fairly close to the experiences from which they were extracted (i.e. they are not always all that abstract or general) and that shape how we engage with (and store in our minds) our subsequent experiences.

To begin to develop a “situated” viewpoint on meaning (“situated” means “local, grounded in actual practices and experiences”), I will consider two areas where it is clear that meaning is multiple, flexible, and tied to culture. In the first case, dealt with in section 3.2, we look at how children acquire the meanings of words. In the second case, which we turn to in section 3.5, we look at how scientists and “everyday” people use the “same” words to mean different things.

In sections 3.3 and 3.4, I introduce the two tools of inquiry (ways of looking at language-in-action in the world) focused on in this chapter. These two tools will play a major role throughout the rest of this book: “situated meanings” and “cultural models.” In subsequent sections, I extend the discussion of situated meanings in several directions. I first develop the particular perspective on the human mind that underlies the approach to meaning taken in this book and discuss some of the
implications it holds. Then, after a brief discussion of the role of “situated meaning” in discourse analysis, I close this chapter with a discussion of how meanings are situated in relationship to history and in relationship to other texts and voices. This latter discussion will introduce a third tool of inquiry, namely “inter-textuality,” that is, the ways in which different sorts of texts and styles of language intermingle to create and transform meaning.

To make matters clearer here, I will often write stressing the ways in which language-in-use is fitted or adapted to the contexts or situations in which it is used. However, as we saw at the outset of Chapter 2, when we use language we both create contexts or situations (make things meaningful in certain ways and not others) and fit or adapt our language to these ongoing contexts or situations (which, after all, often get created in relatively similar ways from time to time and usually stay in existence, thanks to people’s interactional work, for a shorter or longer period of time). In fact, it is because children learn how to fit their language to the contexts primarily created by others in their social and cultural groups that they learn that certain forms of language can create and transform such contexts in quite active ways.

3.2 A child acquiring the meaning of a word

Consider the case of a little girl learning the word “shoe.” At first, she uses the word only for the shoes in her mother’s closet. Eventually, however, she “overextends” the meaning of the word (beyond what adults would use it for). Now she uses it, not only in situations where shoes are involved, but also while handling her teddy bear’s shoeless feet, passing a doll’s arm to an adult to be refitted on the doll, putting a sock on a doll, and when looking at a picture of a brown beetle (Griffiths 1986: 296–7).

At this point, the little girl associates the word “shoe” with a variety of different contexts, each of which contains one or more salient “features” that could trigger the use of the word. The picture of the beetle is associated with the word “shoe” presumably in virtue of features like “shiny” and “hard” and “oval shaped”; the doll’s arm merits the word “shoe” in virtue of features like “fittable to the body” and “associated with a limb of the body,” and so forth.

What the little girl is doing here is typical even of how adults deal with meaning. Of course, she still must learn the full range of features she ought to consult in a context in order to call something a “shoe,” but more importantly, she must also come to realize that the features associated with different contexts which trigger the application of a word are not just a random list. Rather, they “hang together” to form a pattern that specific sociocultural groups of people find significant.

For example, in the case of shoes, features like “hard,” “shiny,” “formal,” “rigid soles,” “solid color,” “with thin laces” tend to “hang together.” They form a pattern,
picking out a certain set of shoes, i.e. formal shoes. On the other hand, features like “soft,” “thick laces,” “perhaps with colored trim,” “flexible soles,” “made of certain sorts of characteristic materials,” “having certain sorts of characteristic looks/designs,” tend to “hang together” to form another sort of pattern. This pattern picks a different set of shoes, i.e. athletic shoes. There are other patterns that pick out other sorts of shoes.

I should point out, as is clear already in any case, that it is no easy matter to put these patterns into words. As we will see below, such patterns are really a matter, in many cases, of unconscious recognition, rather than conscious thought. Furthermore, some features in a pattern are always present, while some are present in some cases and not in others (e.g. note our “perhaps with colored trim” above).

There are patterns of features like “having a shape contoured to a human foot,” “covering a significant amount of the foot,” “flexible enough to fit on foot,” but “relatively rigid” that “hang together” in such a way that they pick out a very large class of the whole set of shoes. However, even these are not a necessary and sufficient set of conditions for shoes in general. There are still borderline cases, like moccasins (not really hard enough) and sandals (don’t really cover enough). When the child reaches this point, she is finding patterns and sub-patterns in the contexts in which the word “shoe” is used.

### 3.3 Situated meanings

So one important aspect of word meaning is this: we humans recognize certain patterns in our experience of the world. These patterns (such as “soft,” “thick laces,” “perhaps with colored trim,” “flexible soles,” “made of certain sorts of characteristic materials,” “having certain sorts of characteristic looks/designs”, etc. = athletic shoes) constitute one of the many situated meanings of a word like “shoe.” In the context of a teenager saying something like “I can’t play basketball today, I haven’t got any shoes,” the situated meaning of “shoes” is something like the pattern above for athletic shoes (actually, a much more customized pattern for acceptable teenage basketball shoes). The sentence certainly does not mean that the teenager has no shoes whatsoever in the closet.

### 3.4 Cultural models

There is more to meaning than patterns, children learning the meanings of words cannot stop there. For adults, words involve, in addition to patterns, a sometimes rather “rough and ready” explanation of these patterns (Anglin 1977; Keil 1979,
1989): Why do these things hang together this way (at least, for people in our social group)?

That is, the patterns are required to make sense within some kind of cause–effect model or “theory” of the domain – in the case of shoes, the domain is feet and footwear. That is, “everyday” people form, transform, and deal with “theories” just as much as scientists do. However, everyday people’s “explanations,” “models,” or “theories” are very often largely unconscious, or, at least, not easily articulated in any very full fashion, and often incomplete in some ways. This does not mean that they are not also often deep and rich in their own way.

For example, why does the word “shoe” have the different situated meanings it has and on what basis can we change them and add new ones? The “explanatory theory” that goes with “shoe” has to do with things like the fact that humans wear clothes (and shoes, in particular) for protection, but that they are also items of fashion (style) and that different sorts of clothes are better or worse suited for different tasks and activities. Different social and cultural groups, as well as different age groups and genders, have different “explanatory theories” about shoes. Furthermore, all these theories themselves encapsulate viewpoints on who wears what sorts of shoes to what purposes and with what “status.”

The child eventually comes to form a “theory” (really, we should say comes to share with her community a more or less tacit “theory”) of the shoe domain. In this theory “higher-order” concepts like “protection,” “style,” and “activities” play a role. This theory makes sense of the patterns the child has found, and, in turn, may well lead the child to discern yet deeper or more complicated patterns.

Such theories are rooted in the practices of the sociocultural groups to which the learner belongs. For example, some African-American teenagers have a different theory of shoes in general, and athletic shoes, in particular, than do some groups of white teenagers (though both groups influence each other over time).

Because these theories are rooted in the practices of socioculturally defined groups of people, I will refer to them as cultural models (D’Andrade 1995; D’Andrade and Strauss 1992; Holland and Quinn 1987; Shore 1996; Strauss and Quinn 1997). It is important to see, as well, that bits and pieces of cultural models are in people’s heads (different bits and pieces for different people), while other bits and pieces reside in the practices and settings of cultural groups and, thus, need not take up residence inside heads at all. We will return to this issue below. [For reasons that will become clear as we go on, I would prefer to replace the term “cultural model” with something like the term “Discourse model,” since the word “culture” is connected to too many diffuse and controversial meanings and because these cultural theories/models are often connected to groups not so grand or fixed as “cultures.” However, since the term “cultural model” – or “cultural schema” – is used in the relevant literature, I will retain it.]
So, in addition to situated meanings, each word is also associated with a cultural model. A cultural model is usually a totally or partially unconscious explanatory theory or “storyline” connected to a word – bits and pieces of which are distributed across different people in a social group – that helps to explain why the word has the different situated meanings and possibilities for the specific social and cultural groups of people that it does.

3.5 Meanings in and out of science

If we turn now to another area – how scientists and “everyday” people understand the “same” words differently – we will see again how the meaning of a word varies across different contexts, both within a given Discourse (e.g. that of physicists) and across different Discourses (e.g. between physicists and “everyday” people). We will see, how the situated meanings of words are connected to different cultural models linked to specific social groups and their characteristic Discourses. We will also see that these different social groups are often in competition with each other over things like power, status, and the “right” to claim to know.

The topic of “everyday” people’s understanding of science is currently a “hot topic” in education (e.g. Bruer 1993; Gardner 1991). Let us consider briefly a specific study bemoaning how poorly we “everyday” “lay” people think about “scientific concepts,” namely Osborne and Freyberg’s discussion of children’s understandings of light in their (now classic) Learning in Science (1985: 8–11).

Children’s views about light were investigated by showing them a set of pictures, one of which showed a person (actually a “stick figure”) facing a candle on a table. The children were asked questions like “Does the candle make light?,” “What happens to the light?,” and “How far does the light from the candle go?” Some children gave answers “acceptable to the scientific community” (ibid.: 9), while others did not. Furthermore, this did not correlate with age. Some nine- and ten-year-olds gave “acceptable” answers, while some fifteen-year-olds gave “unacceptable” answers, though many of them could successfully define such terms as “reflection” and “refraction.” This is not actually surprising since on these sorts of tasks many adults give “immature” answers.

Many children claimed that the light from the candle travels only a short distance (“One metre at the most,” “About one foot”) or stays where it is at the candle (“Just stays there and lights up,” “Stays there,” ibid.: 9). Some children suggested that the distance the light travels from the candle depends on whether or not it is daytime or night-time, claiming that the light travels further at night. Views like these are held even by many students who have studied the topic of light in school: “While teaching may have had some influence on pupils’ views about this phenomenon it can be seen that the effect is not great” (ibid.: 9):
How are we to explain the rather ‘strange’ ideas that some children have about light? From our study it became clear that children’s ideas are strongly influenced by their egocentric or human-centred view of the world. Light from a candle, for example, is deemed to travel as far as any object which is obviously illuminated by it. If they (the children) can’t see the illumination, then the light hasn’t got as far as that. In the daytime, objects more than about 0.5 metres from a candle do not appear illuminated by it, but the situation is different at night.

(ibid.: 11)

How, you might ask, can people (namely, in respect to many of these sorts of tasks, us) be so stupid? I would argue that people are not, in fact, so stupid. We can see this if we note that, in one perfectly good sense, the correct answer to the question “How far does the light from the candle go?” is the one our science educators count as “incorrect,” namely, “not very far” (though the “correct” scientific answer is that a ray of light travels indefinitely far unless and until it strikes an object). This is so because in many “everyday” contexts “light” means (or is “confounded with” or, to use a less invidious term, “compounded with”) illumination, and illumination is the range through which an observer can see visible effects of the light. Further, this range is, indeed, greater at night than in the daytime.

Let me give another example to make my point clear. Here is another remark from Osborne and Freyberg: “. . . some children consider that, when sugar is dissolved in hot water, there is ‘nothing left but the taste’ (ibid.: 58).” But, when a solid is put into a liquid and dissolves so that no parts of it are visible, the correct everyday way to describe this is to say that the solid has “disappeared.” In everyday, non-scientific practice, “disappeared” does not mean “all material, including any esoteric material discoverable by scientists (such as molecules or atoms), has gone out of existence.” Rather, it means that some object I formerly saw is now no longer visible. The everyday word “disappear” does not refer to science or scientists at all. Descriptions like “there is nothing left but the taste” are perfectly correct in our everyday contexts of communication.

There is another way to look at what is happening here. Let us call “the lifeworld” all those contexts in which we humans think, act, and communicate as “everyday” people and not as “specialists” (e.g. physicists, doctors or lawyers, etc.). Of course, even specialists spend lots of their time in their lifeworld, outside their professional specialist worlds (e.g. the world of physics). In actuality, there are many different socioculturally-specific lifeworlds, different lifeworld Discourses, because people from different social and cultural groups have different ways of thinking, acting, and talking as “everyday,” non-specialist people.
What's happening in the sort of cognitive science research we are considering here is that one form of language, practice, and thinking, namely, that of “professional physicists,” is being substituted for another form, namely that of the “lifeworld.” The lifeworld form is claimed to be a mistaken version of the scientific form, when, in fact, the lifeworld form is not actually trying to be “correct” in the same way in which the scientific form is.

This move is most certainly an attempt on the part of science to “colonize” the lifeworld and denigrate everyday ways of knowing. This is, indeed, one reason so many children do so poorly in science in school. It also suggests, I believe, an incorrect view of how thinking works. Both this example, and our earlier discussion of children acquiring the meanings of words, suggest that words are not associated with general concepts that accompany them wherever they go.

Earlier in this chapter we argued that the meanings with which words are associated are situated meanings. In the context of the lifeworld and questions like “How far does the light go?,” asked while staring at a lamp or a picture of a candle, the situated meaning associated with “light” has to do with “illumination” and spaces “bathed” in illumination. In the context of physical science, there are a number of different situated meanings that could be associated with “light,” one of which (but only one of which) is “waves” that travel indefinitely far and which can reflect off surfaces. In the context of theater, “light” is associated with yet different situated meanings, e.g. with various lighting effects.

Furthermore, the multiple situated meanings for “light” in our “lifeworld” are connected to a “cultural model” (theory) of light (e.g. light “fills” spaces that are otherwise “filled” with darkness; light is healthy and good; light sources produce light, and much more). The multiple situated meanings for “light” in the physicist’s world (e.g. waves versus particles) are also connected to a theory. In this case it is a “formal theory” which we might say is physicists’ “cultural model” of light when they are being physicists and not “everyday” people.

What this discussion should make clear is that the situated meanings a word has are relative to a specific Discourse. The Discourse of physics has a different set of situated meanings for the word “light” than do life-world Discourses.

3.6 Situated meanings as “assemblies”

Thus far, I have talked about humans recognizing various patterns in their experience in virtue of which a word has specific situated meanings. But this way of talking can, in fact, become too static. Another way to talk about situated meanings is to say that they are assembled out of diverse features, “on the spot,” as we speak, listen, and act (Barsalou 1987; 1991, 1992; Clark 1993). Instantly, in context, we
assemble the features that will constitute the pattern or situated meanings that a word will have in that context.

Different contexts invite different assemblies. A formal wedding invites one to assemble one sort of situated meaning for “shoe” and a pick-up game of basketball at the park invites one to assemble a different sort of situated meaning. If one were unfortunate enough to become poor and homeless, one might soon learn to assemble a new and quite different situated meaning for “shoe.”

“Concepts” or “meanings” are “jerry-rigged” on the spot in integral interaction with context. Sometimes these assemblies are fairly routine and automatic thanks to having been done more or less in the same way on many past occasions; other times they require new work to come up with novel assemblies for new contexts. Novel assemblies are always a possibility as features of the context or the world in which we live change or as one faces relatively novel contexts. The assembly process is guided by, and, in turn, helps to transform and change, a cultural model that explains (often partially and sometimes inconsistently) why and how certain assemblies are linked to certain sorts of contexts.

So we can either talk about people recognizing patterns of features or assembling patterns of features. These are two ways of talking about the same thing. However, the latter way has the advantage of stressing meaning as an active process. Even if the assembly is, in many cases, rather routine and conventional, there is always the potential for less routine assemblies.

The “assembly” way of talking has a further advantage. So far, we have treated the relationship between language and context itself in too static and unidimensional a way. We have talked as if the “context” is just “out there” and language is adapted to it. But the relationship between language and context is, as said in Chapter 2, much more two-way and dynamic than this. We do recognize or assemble situated meanings based on context, but we also construe the context to be a certain way and not another based on the situated meanings we assemble.

If I utter “sweet nothings,” assembling the situated meanings they imply, in a certain situation, I am both taking and making the context as a romantic one. We see here, too, that situated meanings are not just in our heads. They are negotiated by people in interaction. My “sweet nothings” can be seen as a “bid” to create a certain context (and to get the other person to attribute certain sorts of situated meanings to my words and deeds) that is accepted, rejected, or countered in certain ways by the person with whom I am interacting.

A situated meaning is an image or pattern that we assemble “on the spot” as we communicate in a given context, based on our construal of that context and on our past experiences (Agar 1994; Barsalou 1991, 1992; Clark 1993; Clark 1996; Hofstadter 1997; Kress 1985; Levinson 1983). One can even “feel” one’s mind assemble different
situated meanings. For example, consider these two utterances about “coffee”: “The coffee spilled, get a mop”; “The coffee spilled, get a broom.”

In the first case, triggered by the word “mop” and your experience of such matters, you assemble a situated meaning something like “dark liquid, perhaps quite hot” for “coffee.” In the second case, triggered by the word “broom” and your experience of such matters, you assemble either a situated meaning something like “dark dry grains” or something like “dark reddish beans.” Of course, in a real context, there are many more signals as how to go about assembling situated meanings for words and phrases.

3.7 A pattern-recognition view of the mind

Our discussion of situated meanings is based on a particular perspective on the nature of the human mind. This perspective takes the mind to be basically an adept pattern recognizer and builder. That is to say, first and foremost, that the mind operates primarily with (flexibly transformable) patterns extracted from experience, not with highly general or decontextualized rules (for a variety of perspectives, see: Bechtel and Abrahamsen 1990; P. M. Churchland 1995; P. S. Churchland and Sejnowski 1992; Clark 1993, 1997; Elman, Bates, Johnson, Karmiloff-Smith, Parisi, and Plunkett 1996; Gee 1992; Hofstadter and the Fluid Analogies Research Group 1995; Margolis 1987, 1993; Minksy 1985; Nolan 1994; Rumelhart, McClelland, and the PDP Group 1986). It recognizes (or assembles) in context patterns like “hard – shiny – formal – solid color – with thin laces” as the situated meaning of “shoe,” though ever ready to adapt and transform such patterns as contexts, times, and worlds change.

This view of the mind has important consequences for areas like education, consequences which we cannot fully pursue here. The mind is no longer viewed as a rule-following logic-like calculator. In fact, the human mind does not deal well with general rules and principles that do not come out of and tie back to real contexts, situations, practices, and experiences. It is crucial, however, to realize that the patterns most important to human thinking and action follow a sort of “Goldilocks Principle”: they are not too general and they are not too specific. Situated meanings are mid-level patterns or generalizations between these two extremes (Barsalou 1992).

Think about recognizing faces. If you see your friend when she is sick as a different person than when she is well, your knowledge is too specific. If, on the other hand, you see all your female friends as the same, your knowledge is too general. The level at which knowledge is most useful for practice is the level at which you see your friend’s many appearances as one person, though different from other people like her. So, too, there is little you can do in physics, if all you can
do is recognize specific refraction patterns: your knowledge is too specific. There is, also, little you can effectively do, beyond passing school tests, if all you can do is recite the general theory of electromagnetism: your knowledge is too general.

Really effective knowledge, then, is being able to recognize, work on, transform, and talk about mid-level generalizations such as, to take physics as an example once again: “light as a bundle of light waves of different wave lengths combinable in certain specific ways” or “light as particles (photons) with various special properties in specific circumstances” or “light as a beam that can be directed in specific ways for various specific purposes (e.g. lasers)” or “light as colors that mix in certain specific ways with certain specific results.” Note the mix of the general and the specific in these patterns.

And it is not just in technical areas, like physics, that mid-level generalizations are crucial. In everyday life as well, they are the basis of thinking for practice. For example, the word (concept) “coffee” is primarily meaningful as a set of mid-level generalizations that simultaneously define and are triggered by experience: dark-liquid-in-a-certain-type-of-cup; beans-in-a-certain-type-of-bag; grains-in-a-certain-sort-of-tin; berries-on-a-certain-type-of-tree; flavoring-in-certain-type-of-food (Clark 1989).

As I have said, situated meanings are not static and they are not definitions. Rather, they are flexibly transformable patterns that come out of experience and, in turn, construct experience as meaningful in certain ways and not others.

To see the dynamic nature of situated meanings, imagine a situated meaning (mid-level generalization) that comes to mind when you think of a bedroom (Clark 1989; Rumelhart, McClelland, and the PDP Research Group 1986). You conjure up an image that connects various objects and features in a typical bedroom, relative, of course, to your sociocultural experience of bedrooms and homes. Now I tell you to imagine that the bedroom has a refrigerator in it. At once you transform your situated meaning for a bedroom, keeping parts of it, deleting parts of it, and adding, perhaps, things like a desk and a college student. Your original situated meaning is quickly replaced by another one.

You can even make up (assemble) situated meanings de novo: e.g. say that I tell you to form a meaning for the phrase (concept) “things you would save first in a fire” (Barsalou 1991). You have no trouble putting together a pattern – again based on your sociocultural experiences – of things like children, pets, important documents, expensive or irreplaceable items, and so forth. You have just invented a mid-level generalization (situated meaning) suitable for action, a new “concept,” one to which we could even assign a new word, but a “concept” tied intimately to your sociocultural experiences in the world.

The moral is this: thinking and using language is an active matter of assembling the situated meanings that you need for action in the world. This assembly is always relative to your socioculturally-defined experiences in the world and, more
Situated meanings and cultural models

or less, routinized (“normed”) through cultural models and various social practices of the sociocultural groups to which you belong (Gee 1992). The assembly processes for “coffee” (in “everyday life”) and “light” (in physics) are fairly routinized, but even here the situated meanings are adapted each time to the specific contexts they are used in and are open to transformations from new experiences. The situated meanings behind words (concepts) like “democracy,” “honesty,” “literacy,” or “masculine” are, of course, less routinized.

Having argued that the meanings of words are not general concepts, we might very well ask now why, if situated meanings drive learning and practicing on the world, do we have the feeling that the word “coffee” is associated with something more general, something that unites and rises above these mid-level patterns? Part of the answer is simply the fact that the single word exists, and we are misled by this fact to think that a single, general meaning exists. But, another part of the answer lies in “cultural models.” The cultural model associated with “coffee” gives us this feeling of generality.

This cultural model associated with “coffee” tells us that coffee grows, is picked, and is then prepared as beans or grain to be made into a drink, as well as into flavorings for other foods. It tells us, as well, the when, where, who, and how about coffee from the perspective of our sociocultural groups (and their view of other groups).

Of course, none of us need know the cultural models associated with words fully. I, for one, have no idea what sort of tree (or is it another sort of plant?) coffee grows on, nor could I recognize a “coffee berry” if I saw one (Aren’t there berries on those trees? Are they berries in the way in which strawberries and blueberries are berries? I don’t know.) I really have no idea how “coffee flavoring” gets made, nor even what the limits are of what counts as “coffee” (this is something that really confuses me in the case of “tea”).

But it is no matter. Other people know the bits I don’t or these bits could be looked up in books or other media. The “storyline” (cultural model) that makes sense of all the different situated meanings for “coffee” (and new ones that may arise) is “out there” in social space, somewhat different for different groups (think of “coffee bars” and yuppies), and itself ever changing.

It is crucial to realize that to “know” a situated meaning is not merely to be able to “say certain words,” e.g. “a cup of coffee,” but to be able to recognize a pattern (e.g. a cup of coffee) in a variety of settings and variations. This is what makes situated meanings both contextualized and somewhat general.

To see this point in another domain, one more important for education, consider again the notion of “light” in physics. First of all, our everyday cultural model for “light” is not, as we have seen, the same as the model (theory) of “light” in physics.
That model is the specialized theory of electromagnetic radiation. It is more overt and articulated than most cultural models.

In physics, “light” is associated with a variety of situated meanings – e.g. as a bundle of waves of different wave lengths; as particles (photons) with various special (quantum-like) properties; as a beam that can be directed in various ways and for various purposes (e.g. lasers); as colors that can mix in various fashions, and more. If one wants to start “practicing” with light so as to learn physics, then one has to get experiences that lead to the acquisition of a few situated meanings (mid-level, contextualized patterns in one’s pattern recognizer that can guide action). Otherwise, one really cannot understand what the theory of light has to explain, at least not in any way that could efficaciously guide pattern recognition and action and reflection.

But I must admit now that I myself do not understand (in any embodied way) these various physically-situated meanings well enough to really have a deep understanding, despite the fact that I have read and can recite lots of the scientific theory behind light in physics. To really teach me, you would have to insure that I got experiences that allowed my mind/brain to really recognize patterns at the level of situated meanings.

And what does it mean to “recognize” these? Situated meanings are correlations of various features, they are patterns that associate various features with each other, e.g. light-as-a-particle-that-behaves-in-terms-of-various sorts-of-contrived-(experimental)-observations-in-certain-characteristic-quantum-like-ways. To recognize such things is to be able to re-cognize (reconstruct in terms of one’s pattern-recognizing capabilities) and to be able to act-on-and-with these various features and their associations in a range of contexts. One’s body and mind have to be able to be situated with (coordinated by and with) these correlated features in the world. Otherwise you have my sort of understanding.

As it is, I cannot really understand what it means to say that light is a wave, even less that it is composed of various waves of different wave lengths, though I can say it. I just have not had the action-and-reflection experiences that would have made this pattern, this correlation of features, meaningful and recognizable in a way useful for practice, and thus, useful for building on in the further development of patterns and theories. Therefore, I cannot, in any deep way, be said to understand the theory of light in physics (though I could pass some tests on it, perhaps), since that theory is what makes (partial) sense of the various patterns connected to the word “light.”

Situated meanings are, then, a product of the bottom-up action and reflection with which the learner engages the world and the top-town guidance of the cultural models or theories the learner is developing. Without both these levels, the learner either ends up with something too general (a cultural model or theory poorly
52 Situated meanings and cultural models

connected to contextualized, mid-level patterns) or with something too specific and contextualized, something that functions too much like a proper name (the word applies just here, I don’t really know why).

We argued above that cultural models don’t just exist in people’s heads, but are often shared across people, books, other media, and various social practices (more on this later). So, too, situated meanings don’t just reside in individual minds; very often they are negotiated between people in and through communicative social interaction, as our example about uttering “sweet nothings” was meant to suggest. To take another example, consider that if a partner in a relationship says something like “I think good relationships shouldn’t take work,” a good part of the ensuing conversation might very well involve mutually negotiating (directly or indirectly through inferencing) what “work” is going to mean for the people concerned, in this specific context, as well as in the larger context of their ongoing relationship. Furthermore, as conversations, and, indeed, relationships, develop, participants often continually revise their situated meanings.

3.8 The social mind

As we have just discussed above, I have taken the view, which is becoming progressively more common in work in cognitive science and the philosophy of mind, that the human mind is, at root, a pattern recognizer and builder (see references at opening of Section 3.6, p. 46). However, since the world is infinitely full of potentially meaningful patterns and sub-patterns in any domain, something must guide the learner in selecting which patterns and sub-patterns to focus on. And this something resides in the cultural models of the learner’s sociocultural groups and the social practices and settings in which they are rooted.

Because the mind is a pattern recognizer, and there are infinite ways to pattern features of the world, of necessity, though perhaps ironically, the mind is social (really cultural). It is social (cultural) in the sense that sociocultural practices and settings guide and norm the patterns in terms of which the learner thinks, acts, talks, values, and interacts (Gee 1992).

This need not, however, mitigate each learner’s own agency. Since each individual belongs to multiple sociocultural groups, the cultural models and patterns associated with each group can influence the others in unique ways, depending on the different “mix” for different individuals (Kress 1985). And, of course, each individual is biologically and, in particular, neurally quite different from every other (Crick 1994).

Thus, we see that, from this perspective, talk about the mind does not lock us into a “private” world, but rather, returns us to the social and cultural world. If the patterns a mind recognizes or assembles stray too far from those used by others in a given Discourse (whether this be the Discourse of physics, bird watching, or a lifeworld Discourse), the social practices of the Discourse will seek to “discipline”
and “renorm” that mind. Thus, in reality, situated meanings and cultural models exist out in the social practices of Discourses as much as, or more than they do inside heads.

3.9 “Situated meanings” as a tool of inquiry

In this chapter, I have treated the terms “situated meaning” and “cultural model” realistically. That is, I have spoken about them as things that exist in the mind and in the world. Indeed, this is, I believe, both true and the easiest way to grasp what they mean and how and why they are significant for discourse analysis.

But it is important to realize that, in the end, these terms are ultimately our ways as theoreticians and analysts of talking about, and, thus, constructing and construing the world. And it is in this guise that I am primarily interested in them. They are “tools of inquiry.” I will discuss cultural models as tools of inquiry more thoroughly in the next chapter. Here I want to sketch out what I mean by “situated meaning” as a tool of inquiry.

“Situated meaning” is a “thinking device” that guides us to ask certain sorts of questions. Faced with a piece of oral or written language, we consider a certain key word or a family of key words, that is, words we hypothesize are important to understanding the language we wish to analyze. We consider, as well, all that we can learn about the context that this language is both used in and helps to create or construe in a certain way. We then ask the following sorts of questions:

- What specific, situated meanings is it reasonable, from the point of view of the Discourse in which these words are used, to attribute to their “author”?
- What specific, situated meanings is it reasonable, from the point of view of the Discourse in which these words are used, to attribute to their “receiver(s)” (interpreter(s))?
- What specific, situated meanings is it reasonable, from the point of view of other Discourses than the one in which the words were uttered or written (Discourses which would or do bring different values, norms, perspectives, and assumptions to the situation) to attribute to actual or possible interpreters from these other Discourses? (e.g. what sorts of situated meanings might a creationist give to a text in biology or a Native American to an American history text if they chose to interpret the text from the point of view of their Discourse and not the one from which the text had originally been produced?)
- What specific, situated meanings is it reasonable, from the point of view of the Discourse in which these words were used or of other Discourses, to assume are potentially attributable to these words by interpreters, whether or not we have evidence that anyone actually activated that potential in the current case?
Our answers to these questions are always tentative. They are always open to revision as we learn more about the context, and we can nearly always learn more about the material, social, cultural, and historical contexts in which the words were uttered or written. However, at some point, what we learn may well cease to change our answers to these sorts of questions in a very substantive way.

Our tentative answers are testable in a variety of different ways, including (but not exhausted by) asking actual and possible producers and receivers what they think (remembering that many, but not all, aspects of situated meanings and cultural models are unconscious); looking at the verbal and non-verbal effects of the language in the present and future; looking at how the past led up to these words and deeds; looking at similar and contrasting uses of language; and appealing to a wide and diverse array of linguistic and contextual factors, as well as different tools of inquiry, at different levels, that we hope converge on the same answer. These sorts of concerns lead us to issues about validity, issues which I will take up in Chapter 5, after I have introduced a variety of other tools of inquiry.

3.10 Context: intertextual and historical

The context of an utterance (oral or written) is everything in the material, mental, personal, interactional, social, institutional, cultural, and historical situation in which the utterance was made that could conceivably influence the answer to any of the questions in section 3.9. Thus, context is nearly limitless. However, as I pointed out, learning more about what producers and interpreters think, believe, value, and share, and how they are situated materially, interactionally, socially, institutionally, culturally, and historically will eventually cease to change the sorts of answers to these questions all that much. The answers cease to change because we have reached the limits of what contextual information was relevant to the producers and interpreters of the utterance or to our research interests.

However, the final question in section 3.9 raises an important issue. Words have histories. They have been in other people’s mouths and on other people’s pens. They have circulated through other Discourses and within other institutions. They have been part of specific historical events and episodes. Words bring with them as potential situated meanings all the situated meanings they have picked up in history and in other settings and Discourses.

Producers and receivers may know and use only some of these potential situated meanings. They may not activate them or only partially activate them. But such meanings are always potentially open to being activated or more fully activated. They are like a virus that may remain inactive for a long while, but that is always there and potentially able to infect people, situations, social practices, and Discourses with new situated meanings (ironically, the meanings are actually old,
but previously unactivated or only partially activated in the Discourse under consideration).

This is the “bite” of theories of “intertextuality.” Any text (oral or written) is infected with the meanings (at least, as potential) of all the other texts in which its words have comported. Studying the meaning potential of texts, in this sense, is an important part of discourse analysis. Such potential situated meanings can have effects even when they are not fully activated by producers and interpreters.

In previous work I have used as an example of such intertextuality a sentence uttered by a scientist during an undergraduate classroom presentation on the neuroanatomy of finches. Let me briefy recap this example here.

In finches, only males sing, not females. The scientist was interested in the way in which the development of the male’s song relates to the structure of its brain. In the course of her presentation, she drew a diagram of the male finch’s brain on the board. The diagram was a large circle, representing the bird’s brain, with three smaller circles inside it, marked “A,” “B,” and “C,” representing discrete localized regions of neurons that function as units in the learning and production of the male’s song.

When the young bird hears its song (in the wild or on tape), it tries to produce the various parts of the song (engages in something like “babbling”). As the young bird’s own productions get better and better, the neurons in region A are “tuned” and eventually respond selectively to aspects of the song the young bird was exposed to and not other songs. The regions marked “B” and “C” also play a role in the development of the song and in its production.

The scientist went on to discuss the relationship between the male’s brain and the hormones produced in the bird’s gonads. The A, B, and C regions each have many cells in them that respond to testosterone, a hormone plentifully produced by the testes of the male bird.

In this context, the scientist uttered the following sentence: “If you look in the brain [of the finch] you see high sexual dimorphism – A/B/C regions are robust in males and atrophied or non-existent in females.” The word “atrophied” in this sentence is a technical term, the correct term required by the current Discourse of biology. Note that one could have viewed the male brain as containing “monstrous growths” and thus as having deviated from the “normal” female brain. Instead, however, the terminology requires us to see the male brain as having developed fully (“robust”) and the female brain as having either “atrophied” or failed to develop (“non-existent”).

The words “robust” and “atrophied” carry potential situated meanings with them from history. It is not an historical accident that “atrophied” has ended up a technical term for the female finch brain (and other similar cases), though this brain is simply less “localized” in terms of discrete regions like A, B, and C.
Females, in medical and biological Discourses in the West from the time of Galen to the present, have been seen as either inferior to males or, at the least, deviant from the male as the “norm” or “fully developed” exemplar of the species (Fausto-Sterling 1985; Laqueur 1990). Rather than retrace this immense history, let me simply point to one very salient moment of it. Consider the following quote from Darwin:

> It is generally admitted that with woman the powers of intuition, of rapid perception, and perhaps of imitation, are more strongly marked than in man; but some, at least, of these faculties are characteristic of the lower races, and therefore of a past and lower state of civilization. The chief distinction in the intellectual powers of the two sexes is shewn by man’s attaining to a higher eminence, in whatever he takes up, than can woman – whether requiring deep thought, reason, or imagination, or merely the use of senses and hands.

(1859: 873; see also Gould 1993: 297–368)

Though Darwin usually did not himself interpret “evolution” as a linear development upward to “better things,” many of his followers did (Bowler 1990). The competition men have faced in their environments has caused their bodies and brains to “develop” further than those of woman, so that it was a commonplace by the nineteenth century and in the early decades of the twentieth that “anthropologists regard[ed] women intermediate in development between the child and the man” (Thomas 1897, cited in Degler 1991: 29). This logic, of course, leads us to see the whole woman, in body and brain, as an “atrophied” man (exactly as Aristotle and Galen did), less developed because less challenged by her environment.

The technical term “atrophied” has its own specific situated meanings in the Discourse of biology. But, thanks to its history, it carries, like a virus, a bevy of additional potential situated meanings and associated cultural models. While the scientist may be unaware or only partially aware of these meanings and models, they have effects none the less.

For example, there are a nearly limitless number of things worth studying at one time in any science. What gets time, money, and attention – what is seen as normal, natural, and important to study – is, in part, an artifact of the long histories of words, situated meanings, cultural models, and theories.

The history of females and development could have been different. So too, could the history of brains. This is a part of the story I have left out here, but see Gee (1996). The history of the development of clinical medicine, surgery, and brain research (Star 1989) led to the localized aspects of brains being considered more important for study than the holistic aspects (and this, as it happens, is changing a bit in current neuroscience). For one thing, tools existed for studying isolated
neurons, but not for studying large parts of the brain acting in concert (tools which now do exist). For another, the emergence of modern medical schools and standardized training give rise to a pedagogical system intolerant of complex pictures of the brain and happy with localized diagrams that associate each part of the brain with a clear and discrete function (however inaccurate many of these diagrams are).

If the history of females, development, and brains had been different, perhaps we would be studying female finches as important sites of holistic brains that represent a form of development, unlike the male’s, that is not overly specialized and special-purpose. Here, too, important things would have been discovered, just as they have been in the current science of birds and brains. I am not claiming that today’s science is “wrong” and the alternative we could come up with by imagining a different history is “right.” There are an endless number of facts to be discovered and different routes to the same or similar theories.

Our alternative imaginings simply show us that situated meanings, meaning potential, cultural models, and theories could have been different. Thus, the present is, indeed, partly an artifact of a very specific past. The present is an outcome of previous situated meanings and cultural models, meanings and models which continue to inhabit the present in more or less overt ways. They always have the potential for further effects in a given Discourse (e.g. someone refers to studies of bird brains and hormones to reinstantiate the “old” story about women as less developed than men).