Nexus Analysis

A practical fieldguide for mediated discourse analysis

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Field test edition:

Appendix to Nexus Analysis: Discourse and the Emerging Internet (Ron and Suzie Scollon, forthcoming, London: Routledge) This version of the Fieldguide is work in progress. We are pleased if you find it useful in planning your research. We only request that you not cite this edition without prior permission. If you have comments and suggestions, please contact the authors:

Ron Scollon (scollonr@georgetown.edu) and Suzie Wong Scollon (sws8@georgetown.edu).
Overview

This fieldguide has been designed to guide researchers using *Nexus Analysis* as the basis for their field research. While it is based on the theoretical framework of Mediated Discourse Analysis, you may find it useful as a guide for any ethnographic study of discourse.

The fieldguide consists of three central tasks—engagement, navigation, and change—and their time scheduling over a one-year field period as a typical field research project. Users will want to adjust the proposed scheduling according to your own research needs. The fieldguide may also be used in short-term studies (in pedagogical or pilot research projects) by focusing on just one or several aspects of a full analysis.

The sequencing of tasks begins by engaging the researcher in the key mediated actions that are relevant to the social issue under study, and then moves to navigating and mapping the cycles of discourse, of people, and of mediational means which are at the heart of the significant actions being studied. Although we discuss changing the nexus of analysis as the third stage, a *nexus analysis* recognizes throughout the analysis that the processes of change are the results of the activities of the researcher in recording the actions, engaging in discourses with the participants, and constructing new courses of action.

A *nexus analysis* of the kind which is organized by this fieldguide is based on concepts which have been developed by the authors as mediated discourse analysis. This fieldguide presupposes a knowledge of mediated discourse analysis which has been developed out of earlier work by the authors and many others in activity and practice theory, interactional sociolinguistics, critical discourse analysis, and linguistic anthropology. For theoretical articulation of that framework, please consult the brief bibliography at the end of the fieldguide.

The Figure A.1 is a reminder of the three activities of a *nexus analysis*.
1. Engaging the nexus of practice

January – February: The first as well as final problem of a nexus analysis is to discover the mediated actions and social actors which are crucial to the production of a social issue and to bringing about social change. The opening task is to look for those mediated actions and participants. In many cases this is a matter of recognition and selection. The tasks in the first section of the fieldguide provide heuristic ways of narrowing down to a clear focus on very specific actions as the center-point of a nexus analysis. It is crucial to this process for the researcher to enter into a zone of identification with those key participants. There is no study from afar in nexus analysis. Identification in a nexus analysis means that the researcher himself or herself must be recognized by other participants as a participant in the nexus of practice under analysis.

We schedule this activity as the first two months of a 12-month nexus analysis.

Recognition and identification of the nexus of practice

Social action occurs at the intersection of the historical bodies of the participants in that action, the interaction order which they mutual produce among themselves and the discourses in place with enable that action or are used by the participants as mediational means in their action. The Figure A.2 is a reminder of these three main factors.

Your recognition of the nexus of practice and your ability to create a zone of identification can be seen as five main activities:

- Establish the social issue you will study
- Find the crucial social actors
- Observe the interaction order
- Determine the most significant cycles of discourse
- Establish your zone of identification

Establish the social issue you will study

Whatever issue you study, you will become deeply involved with it. The first place to look for that issue is in your own life, your own actions, and your own value system. What do you wish somebody would do something about? What do you think ought to be changed
in the world in which you regularly live? What gets you upset when you see the news or hear what is going on in your city or country or the world?

It is important to begin your study as soon as possible. You cannot know at the outset what all of the consequences and ramifications of your study will be nor can you know at the beginning what you will think is the main issue itself later on in the study. So by all means do not spend too much time on this stage.

**Find the crucial social actors**

Who are the primary social actors in the mediated action in which you are interested. In this case ‘who’ means both who are they in the sense of their identities and social roles and what are their histories. You want to know what social identities they are producing or claiming through the mediated action you are analyzing, what social statuses do they bring into the site of engagement in which this action occurs as well as how they are producing them. You also want to know their histories or historical body with this action, with the discourses which are circulating through this action, and with the other participants in the situation. Basically you want to know who are they to do this and how did they become enabled to take this action? The main point is to make every attempt to identify the key figures who will justify deeper study as you move into the second stage, navigating the nexus of practice.

**Observe the interaction order**

In trying to identify the crucial moments to study for your nexus analysis, then, you will need to discover what are the typical interaction orders within which the mediated actions occur. Are people usually alone or in small ‘withs’? Do these actions occur in task groups or teams? Do they occur as performances before audiences?

Of course we cannot easily separate our interest in the historical bodies of individual participants and the interaction order, so we will want to know what is the history of this interaction order for these participants. Do they often go shopping together or is this the first time? Is this a class which is meeting right at the beginning of the semester or near the end of the semester when people know each other very well?

**Determine the most significant cycles of discourse**

Your question about discourses is two-fold: Given a particular scene, you want to know what discourses are circulating through that scene and in particularly through the action you are interested in analyzing. Looked at the other way around, as we shall discuss below when we talk about making a scene survey, you want to know about any discourse what scenes and actions are the means or sites of its circulation.

Be sure to think about whether or not the discourses you are observing are overt or covert, spoken or written? Are these discourses ‘precipitated’ in the form of the ‘crystalized’ design and form of material objects such as the design discourse that has produced the desk we are using or the software in this word processor? Are these discourses anticipatory of actions to come?

While the main task of answering these and other questions is taken up in navigating the nexus of practice, here the goal is to locate the central and crucial discourses which are intersecting with the interaction order and the historical bodies of the participants to produce the focal mediated actions of our study.

**Establish your zone of identification**
The activities of establishing a social issue to research, finding the most significant social actors, observing the interaction order, and determining the cycles of discourse are concerned with the recognition of a significant nexus of practice; they have been directed toward finding or recognizing the main mediated action (or actions) which sit at the center of the nexus of practice you will study. Along with this recognition you are also locating yourself in a zone of identification with the participants in this nexus of practice.

As you conduct your preliminary studies of the scene, participants, events, discourses, and actions you are finding, you will almost inevitably be drawn into closer participation with the participants in those nexus of practice. You should not seek to stay aloof from the nexus of practice. On the contrary, it is your goal to become a full-fledged participant so that your ‘research’ activities merge with your ‘participation’ activities. Aristotle is said to have said that if you want to convince an Athenian it is better to be an Athenian. If you want to change a mediated action (and consequently a nexus of practice) it is necessary to be a participant in that nexus of practice.

Above all, it should be remembered that this first stage, engaging the nexus of practice, is really preliminary to a nexus analysis. The nexus analysis consists of navigating the cycles of discourse and the histories of the historical bodies which constitute a mediated action and of the discourse analysis and motive analysis of how that navigation is done by both the analyst and the participants. Where it is abundantly clear what the key mediated actions are, the only really indispensable aspect of engaging the nexus of practice is to establish the researcher within a zone of identification.

**Strategies for getting the answers**

If you are not immediately or obviously already involved in a nexus of practice which you are interested in studying, the recognition of a significant mediated action might consist of a combination of the following elements which are taken up in turn below (these elements are based on R Scollon, 2001; see bibliography for full citation). Also any of the several books on the ethnography of communication (e.g. Saville-Troike 2003) will give you very useful suggestions from the comparative research literature. You may also want to develop your own concept of the issue you want to study by making a survey of the public discourses on social issues, by conducting scene surveys, or focus groups as we suggest below.

**Discourses survey**

There are two very effective types of survey which can help to ensure that you working within cycles of discourse that are germane to an important issue as well as the crucial points at which mediated actions occur—media content surveys and public opinion (or ‘What’s in the news?’) surveys. The first of these can be done relatively easily by collecting current newspapers and magazines, visiting news websites, and watching television news broadcasts. While ‘hot’ issues tend to change rapidly in these media, a careful analysis can show which issues continually return for attention. You can also check the websites of governmental, non-governmental, and corporate grant-making organizations to see which issues they have currently identified as needing research.

**Scene surveys**

Scene surveys can make your study more concrete by locating the people, places, and actions within those places which are keeping the cycles of discourse in flow. The idea is to find where the mediated actions in which you are interested take place, who the central participants are and in what forms of the interaction order, and what discourses are
circulating through those scenes. We have organized these scene surveys around three kinds of questions:

**Historical body questions:** Where do the people you have identified as the main participants spend their time? Which ones are important for the issue you are studying. One of the surest ways of locating the crucial scenes is simply to follow the main participants through their daily and weekly cycles of activity.

**Interaction order questions:** What is the place of the participants within the interaction orders you observe throughout their days? Our actions arise not only from our own personal histories and values, but are also constrained or enabled by the people we are together with at a particular moment of action. You need to know not only what are the scenes within which people take action, but how do they organize themselves for social interaction within those scenes.

**Discourses in place questions:** The crucial scenes you will study can also be found by following the cycles of discourse. Of course you will be asking these questions about social actors, the interaction order, and discourses concurrently in any attempt to locate the crucial scenes for your study. As you follow a person’s daily round of habitual places and scenes, you will be asking what are the interaction orders dominant within those scenes and what discourses are cycling through them. Your main purpose at this stage is simply to narrow down to a few scenes in which you find there is an intersection of the people on whom you want to focus, the interaction order that is most germane to your study, and in which the discourses you are concerned about are significant factors.

**Focus groups**

Once you have identified the most crucial scenes, participants, and mediated actions relevant to the social issue you are studying, you need to check these selections with the participants in your nexus of practice. In our experience you can achieve a more robust analysis if you actually step outside this primary group to conduct focus groups whose participants are demographically like the ones you are studying/working with but not the same ones or even not known to them. If you have been careful in your preceding work, these focus groups will mostly confirm your thinking. Pay particular attention to divergences, however, as these will indicate that you are still not directly on center in your recognition of mediated actions to study.

**Getting the answers**

A well triangulated and carefully comparative study should cover four types of data (Ruesch and Bateson, 1968 [1951]; but also see S Scollon, 1998; R Scollon, 1998, 2001; R Scollon and S Scollon 2001).

- **Members’ generalizations:** What do participants say they do (normatively)? This is often at variance with both objective observation and with that member’s own individual experience.
- **Neutral (objective) observations:** What does a neutral observer see? Often at variance with the generalizations made about the group or the self.
- **Individual experience:** What does an individual describe as his or her experience? Often characterized as being different from one’s own group.
- **Interactions with members:** How do participants account for your analysis? This will mostly focus on the resolution of contradictions among the first three types of data.

As much as possible your research throughout your nexus analysis project should include all four of these kinds of data. You should try to discover if there are normative
expectations held by the participants in your nexus of practice. You want to find out how they are expressed, how they are encoded, how they are learned, and how they are enforced. Much of this aspect of your project will be done as your discourse and motive analysis. But, of course, it is not enough to know what people say they do. You need to observe directly to see to what extent members’ generalizations about the nexus of practice meet with the ‘reality’ you observe. People often act very differently from their own descriptions of their actions or the actions of members of their group.

Therefore, the third kind of material you need to get is how individual members experience that their nexus of practice as individuals. While they might describe generalized behavior of ‘people’ in that nexus, they might also claim that their own actions are quite divergent. Perhaps for one it is a scene they've participated in once and for others it is something they do frequently. Each of these different experiences would give a different understanding of the nexus of practice. Finally, you should talk about your analysis with members to see to what extent they agree or disagree with what you have observed. This latter step often comes somewhat later; we think that focus groups are a good place to seek this kind of data if it does not arise naturally elsewhere in your study.

Collecting data, then, should be based on trying to get all four types of data. You should use as much objective recording as you can (video and audio recording; photographs; artifacts such as magazines, newspapers, CDs, tickets, posters, handbills; fieldnotes taken in the scene; interviews of participants). Sometimes you will get all four types of data in one batch of material. An interview or a conversation, for example, might give you quite a range of data as when a person says, ‘Everybody says we should X (members’ generalization), but I usually do Y (individual experience).’ Then you observe that while this person is saying X and Y, he is doing Z (objective observation). You say, ‘But I just noticed that you are doing Z (interactions with members).’
2. Navigating the nexus of practice

March – October: The main work of a nexus analysis is navigating the nexus of practice. A nexus of practice is the point at which historical trajectories of people, places, discourses, ideas, and objects come together to enable some action which in itself alters those historical trajectories in some way as those trajectories emanate from this moment of social action.

In engaging the nexus of practice you have established the social issue you will study, found the crucial social actors, observed the interaction order and determined the most significant cycles of discourse. This has given you your zone of identification and helped to identify the crucial mediated action (or actions) where that social issue is being produced, ratified, or contested. Now the task is to map the cycles of the people, places, discourses, objects, and concepts which circulate through this micro-semiotic ecosystem looking for anticipations and emanations, links and transformations, their inherent timescales, and to place a circumference of relevance around the nexus of practice. Conceptually these may be separate tasks but in practice it is very difficult and largely pointless to try to keep them separated. Here we take up the cycles first and then look at the mapping concerns following that.

Semiotic cycles

A mediated action is an action taken by one or more social actors using one or more mediational means. Actions occur in specific places which are themselves highly complex networks of mediational means by which or within which actions are taken.

If we think of an action as a moment in time and space in which the historical bodies and the interaction order of people and the discourses in place intersect, then each of these can be thought of as having a history that leads into that moment and a future that leads away from it in arcs of semiotic cycles of change and transformation. In some cases the action itself may give further impetus to the cycle like a pumping station along an oil pipeline or it may deflect or alter the cycle like an electron passing through a magnetic field. To some extent the cycles or life histories of people, places, discourses, and objects can only be seen through these moments of freshened impulse or directional change and transformation.

In thinking of these cycles do not try to map all the semiotic cycles of every person, discourse, or object that occurs within the place where the mediated action is occurring. The purpose of your activities in engaging the nexus of practice (Section 1) was precisely to make a selection so that you can focus your inquiry. Concentrate now on mapping the cycles into and away from the mediated action you have selected and set aside other considerations at least until they can be demonstrated to be important to consider.

Persons – Historical body

First, your concern is not with a full life-history of each of the social actors involved in the nexus of practice. Instead, your interest is to understand how the action-practice and the mediational means you are studying came into the historical body of each of the participants. Second, there are often many hidden participants in an action, especially when a mediating technology is involved. The computer technicians mediating an email chat, the finance company employee monitoring a credit card transaction, the chef in a restaurant, or the driver of a bus may each have a role that can be invisible at first as we are accustomed to just setting aside as non-relevant these participants who are in a ‘supporting role’ to our actions. So the goal here is to try to be certain you have included
all of the relevant participants, but at the same time try to keep focused on those aspects of the historical body which are relevant to the action in which you have an interest.

The guiding question here is: **How did these participants all come to be placed at this moment and in this way to enable or carry out this action?**

This question may be developed with the following more specific questions we suggest that you keep in mind:

- How habitual or innovative is the action-practice ‘for that person’? I.e., to what extent is this a ‘practice’?
- How intentional (agentive) or accidental? How do you know? (To think about this see discourse analysis below); According to whom is this intentional? For more on this see motive analysis below)
- When and where is the last prior ‘like’ action? I.e., is there a link between this action and this type of place or these other participants? For example, a person doesn’t normally drink coffee or smoke cigarettes but always makes an exception with a particular friend.
- To what other practices is this linked for this person? Does he or she always do something else at the same time? Anyone who has tried to quit smoking gradually comes to realize the myriad practices having a cigarette is linked to. Also ask this for other people, mediational means, places, discourse, concepts.
- How much is this action keyed to the uniqueness of the person, or, alternatively, how dispensable is the person? Could it be anybody who does the action, just so long as it gets done? A President can sign a bill into law; a municipal worker can paint the traffic lines on the street. Neither can simply switch and accomplish the other action.
- What is the emotional valence or the emotional impact on the participant of this action? Is it exciting, routine, or boring to do this; is the action sought or avoided? Is it so much part of the historical body the person sometimes wonders why it isn’t as enjoyable as it used to be or as anticipated?
- What discourses are transformed, resemiotized, or internalized in this action? A doctor giving an exam plays out in action many years of the formal study of medical discourses from physiology to patient care. A dentist replacing a filling plays out commercial discourses, teacher-student evaluational discourses as well as nurturing dependent discourses as well as discourses of oral health care. A camper lighting a camp stove plays out in action the reading of the instructions for that stove.

**Discourses in place – Semiotic aggregates**

There are very few ‘pure’ places in our worlds where everything in that place serves a single purpose and where there is nothing extraneous. When we cross the street at a street corner we pay attention to (foreground) not only approaching cars but the design of the walkways, the roadway, the pedestrian crosswalks, and the traffic lights that regulate the vehicles and pedestrians. We ignore (background) the markings of the infrastructure from gas and water access plates on the ground to municipal numbers identifying the light and traffic signal poles. When we have a cup of coffee in a coffee shop we foreground such things as the type of coffee we want to order and background the brand name on the lamps in the ceiling above. On the other hand, a person working for the company that sells lamps may consider the coffee rather incidental to his or her interest in getting the manager to place an order with his brand for the next relamping of the shop.
Concerning the places where actions occur the guiding question is: What aspects of this place are central or foregrounded as crucial to the action on which you are focusing and what aspects are backgrounded?

Further questions to have in mind would include the following:

- What ‘place’ supports are available for this action such as furniture of particular kinds or the ambience or lack of it.
- Is this a customary or unusual place for this action? That is, does this design, including structures and objects, support or undermine the action being taken?
- What co-occurrences with other actions by other people are part of the ‘background’?
- What is the historical trajectory of this place; in what cycles does it function? What’s embedded in its history—ancient, new, special purpose design? Is it on the rise or decadent? Is it being transformed by this action?
- Are the linkages among those parts selected to be foregrounded typical (historical) or occasional? That is, for example, how long has coffee been ‘traditionally’ taken with (or without) milk in this place?

**Discourses in place – Overt discourse**

A place is constituted not only by the built structures, furniture and decorative objects but also by the discourses present in that place. A coffee shop might be constituted by a combination of many private conversational discourses, the semi-public service discourses involved in placing and receiving orders, the backstage discourse of the servers, commercial discourses of the products on sale and many others.

It is only an analytical heuristic to try to separate discourses from other aspects of the built environment of places. Is the brand name coffee machine in a coffee shop part of the built environment or one of the discourses? Of course it is both, depending on the focus of our analysis. What is important is that for the server the coffee machine is foregrounded in her or his action of making the coffee but backgrounded for the people having a conversation at a table just a few feet away even though both the machine and its brand name remain clearly visible.

As we noted with the built structures and other design aspects of the place the guiding question is: What discourses in this place are central or foregrounded as crucial to the action on which you are focusing and what discourses are backgrounded?

Specific questions might include the following:

- What kinds of overt discourse are present? These might be expected to include:
  - The interaction order; that is, the talk, writing, gesturing or image making of the people who are there as singles, as conversational pairs, as customer and server, and all of the other combinations by which people organize their social gatherings.
  - Signs, images, graphics, texts, music; most public places at least in the urban worlds we inhabit are full of signs, advertisements, the brand names and logos on our clothing and other objects and often enough background music.
  - Place discourses (see places above); Street corners can be distinguished from parks and meeting or seminar rooms, coffee shops, living rooms, and kitchens. How are these semiotic aggregates in themselves discourses that contribute to the action under examination?
• How ‘noisy’ or quiet is this place (from the point of view of the number and kinds of discourse present)? Shopping malls and urban business districts tend to be ‘noisy’ in the sense that there are many different and often unrelated discourses calling out for our attention. Parks and residential areas are often much quieter in presenting many fewer discourses. How are these differences useful to the participants in constructing their actions?
• Is the action polyfocal or monofocal? That is, does this action focus on a single discourse with high intensity or does it play among multiple discourses simultaneously?
• Whether there are many or few discourses, there is always the question of how the selection to focus on one or several is made? Is this done gesturally or by ‘cleaning’ away unwanted background discourses?

Discourses – Internalized as practice

Many of the discourses present in an action have been ‘submerged’ into practice by long habit. The first time you cook a particular dish you might use a recipe and follow it carefully. After a few times you only need to glance at the recipe to remind yourself of the main ingredients and the sequence. Finally, you just ‘spontaneously’ cook this dish. As a child a parent or teacher might carefully rehearse with you that the ‘red light means stop; the green light means go.’ Ultimately, you come to just stop or proceed when you see the light with no memory of the steps by which you internalized this discourse.

Not all of our actions are internalized this way from what were once very explicit and external discourses, but in mapping the cycles of discourse within a nexus of practice, especially when we set a larger circumference (see timescales and circumferences below), we want to know how discourses become transformed into practices and objects and then how those practices and objects are, in turn, transformed into new discourses.

Here the guiding question is: What discourses are ‘invisible’ in this action because they have become submerged in practice?

This is a complex question to address as it’s difficult to see ‘invisible’ discourses in the present event; these discourses tend to be only visible by mapping semiotic or discourse cycles backward (or forward) around the arc of their circumference away from the event on which you are focused. But that is, in fact, the goal in a nexus analysis. Particularly important actions are ones in which the process of transformation itself is visible, and so this is a good place to begin the study with the following questions:

• What discourses are being foregrounded for the purpose of becoming habitual?
• Are any of the participants ‘teaching’ any of the others?
• What actions or practices (or objects or built structures) are being foregrounded as part of the discourse of participants?
• Are any of the participants calling attention to objects or structures so that they can be talked about?
• Overall how ‘automatic’ are the actions here? [Automatic actions are likely to embed submerged discourses.]
• Conversely, how new or unpracticed are the actions you are studying?
• If the action is new or unpracticed, are there anticipations of future arcs of the cycle where this action is expected to become practice?

Objects – Cultural tools (mediational means)
In mediated discourse analysis (or activity theory or mediated action theory) there is no meaningful distinction between objects and concepts as mediational means (cultural tools). Here we treat them separately just as we did discourses and practices above, even though what begins as an external object such as a musical instrument for a musician, a spatula for a cook, or a car for a driver becomes ‘submerged’ as it is internalized in action as a concept ‘the music’, ‘cooking’, or ‘driving’.

The guiding question about objects as mediational means is: What is the history of this object as a mediational means for this action?

This can be opened up a bit through the following questions:

- To what degree is the object (mediational means) designed for the action or is it an ‘opportunity’ object? Pounding in a tent stake with a handy rock uses an opportunity object as a mediational means. Conversely, a Phillips-head screwdriver is designed for a very specific kind of screw and other tools are very difficult to use for the action of turning in one of these screws.
- How is the object which is the mediational means for this action altered in – or through the action?
- How did this mediational means come to be present for this action; i.e. through whose agency?
- What is the state or degree of repair or attrition?
- How thoroughly internalized is this mediational means and by which social actors? How old (or new) is it in the historical body?
- Is this object (mediational means) the result of a resemiotization? (see transformation below). The agenda of a meeting, for example, is normally a printed text which has resemiotized discussions among a few key administrators or managers which is then used as a mediational means for the conduct of the meeting by all participants.

Concepts – Cultural tools (mediational means)

While the questions are the same basic questions as you have just considered, where the mediational means are concepts, it is likely that that is the result of a much longer timescale of internalization.

The guiding question about concepts, like objects as mediational means, is: What is the history of this concept as a mediational means for this action?

The following questions may help to fill out your understanding of the trajectories involved in these mediational means:

- What conceptual/psychological tools are used (language, semiotic codes, number systems, knowledge of how to fill our forms or to order ‘designer’ coffee, social codes for behavior)?
- How widely are these shared among the participants?
- How long or fully internalized are these mediational means?
- Are they internalized about the same or equally for all participants?
- Where, when, or with whom were these mediational means internalized?
- To what extent are these psychological or conceptual mediational means the result of some ‘re-semiotization’? A word such as ‘learning disabled’ or ‘non-compliant’ may be used as a concept to resemiotize a long history of social interactions and tests.
- How are these mediational means transformed in and through the action? (see transformation below)
Mapping

You should have identified the crucial mediated actions in which you are interested and this will have defined your focus on specific people, places, discourses and mediational means (both concrete objects and concepts). Now the goal is to examine the semiotic cycles of each these from the point of view of the considerations below.

Anticipations and emanations

Much of our lives are taken up in either anticipating actions which are yet to come or reflecting on actions now past. Many of the actions we take are themselves anticipations of actions yet to come or the result of earlier actions. Grocery shopping may be enjoyable in itself but is largely a matter of anticipating the meals which we will cook and eat later on. Cleaning up the kitchen after a meal is an emanation of the actions of cooking and eating a meal. It is also, of course an anticipation of wanting to have a clean kitchen in which to plan and cook the next meal.

As a way to plot the place of an action on the arc of a cycle over a longer timescale the following questions might be useful:

- To what extent is this action anticipatory of a following action or an emanation from a preceding action? And which actions? How are these determined (see discourse analysis and motive analysis below)?
- How is this action anticipated in the historical body of the persons involved?
- Do they dress before leaving home so as to be able to accomplish this action later in the day?
- Or was this action anticipated much earlier such as in taking a training course or planning a vacation or making plane, hotel, or other reservations, or booking a room for a meeting?
- Is this action talked about as an anticipation or an emanation (see discourse analysis below) or perhaps as both?
- Design is a major form of anticipation, cleaning and waste disposal are major forms of emanations from actions and events. How are anticipation and emanation ‘built in’ in the mediational means used?

Points and intervals

Actions are points along the circumference of the semiotic cycles of people, discourses, places, and mediational means and some of them are of major importance (see transformations below). While it is unlikely that we could imagine states of complete inaction, between major actions are intervals of lesser activity. In mapping the cycles it seems most useful to concentrate first on the points of action in these cycles and only return to a study of the intervals when it seems that is necessary for a fuller understanding of a particular action.

The guiding question concerning points and intervals is: What are the key points in the cycle of this person, discourse, etc. where there is a change or a transformation (resemiotization)? A subsidiary question is: What is happening in the intervals between these points as anticipations (or reflections upon) these changes?

Further questions:

- How often does this action occur in the life cycle of this (these) person(s), or mediational means, or discourses? Is it very frequent, very rare?
• What are the immediately preceding and following intervals like or is this action a point in a tight series of actions? [A driver on a long stretch of cross-continental highway may ‘act’ so little that sleep sets in; a driver in a crowded city is constantly stopping, starting, passing, and checking for the presence and actions of other vehicles.]
• Are the objects used as mediational means used frequently for this or for other actions or are they specially used and only rarely?
• Is this place a place of action (i.e. frequent and varied actions like a train station or shopping mall) or a ‘quiet’ place where little is expected to happen?

**Timescales**

People have normal life expectancies as do some semiotic cycles of discourses, actions, and objects. A person might live 60 – 70 years but the discourse surrounding a new technology might last only a few years. [How much longer will anyone remember what a ‘floppy disk’ is?] We have developed Table 1 based on Lemke’s work (Lemke 2000 a, b, 2002). Much discourse analysis is limited to studies within the Circadian timescale. The questions you are interested in when you do a nexus analysis are often located on a much longer timescale such as the lunar or even solar timescale. Sometimes it is years between the first encounter with a discourse and its subsequent internalization as habitual action in practice. Furthermore, each of the elements for which you are mapping a cycle—participants, the interaction order, mediational means, discourses, and places is likely to be based on a different time scale, for example, a musician of 50 years of age who plays a concert of 2 hours on a violin that is hundreds of years old in a concert hall that was just completed two weeks ago including works from the 18th century and others newly commissioned for that performance.

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cardiac - respiratory</td>
<td>Vocal articulation</td>
<td>Edge of awareness; the phoneme.</td>
<td>Single action, a step in walking, holophrase, short monologue, in context.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utterance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Circadian</td>
<td>Exchange</td>
<td>Seconds to minutes</td>
<td>Dialogue; interpersonal relations; developing situation; utterance, sentence, crossing a city street, ordering fast food item.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Episode</td>
<td></td>
<td>o(15 min)</td>
<td>Thematic, functional unit; speech genre; conversation, work break; fast food purchase, intermission in games &amp; concerts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Event</td>
<td></td>
<td>Hour</td>
<td>Curriculum genre: Informal meal (lunch), conversation, grocery shopping, meeting (short).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Event sequence, ritual</td>
<td></td>
<td>o(2.75 hr)</td>
<td>Business meeting, shopping trip, formal meal, movie, ball game, concert.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business day</td>
<td></td>
<td>Day</td>
<td>Work day, school day, open hours for a business.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lunar</td>
<td>Project Unit or Unit sequence, sale</td>
<td>11.5 days</td>
<td>Project deadline, pay period</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solar</td>
<td>Advertising campaign, sale, roadwork</td>
<td>4 months</td>
<td>Organizational level; unit in next scale.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban planning, public works projects; personnel rotation</td>
<td>o(3.2) years</td>
<td>Organizational level; limit of institutional planning; length of time in job.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human life cycle</td>
<td>Urban development, company lifespan</td>
<td>o(32 years)</td>
<td>Biographical timescale; identity change.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historical - cultural</td>
<td>National, cultural, social change</td>
<td>o(320 years)</td>
<td>Historical timescale; new institutions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The timescale may be inherent in the element you are concerned with—a human lifespan has a ‘normal’ expectancy and so you may regard a participant as early, middle, or late in that ‘normal’ timescale. At the same time, the significance of an action (or activity or activity system) is partly a question of how the participants place it on such a timescale. A person in her twenties might be relatively early on that ‘normal’ timescale in calendar years but as a patient in a consultation with a doctor concerning the possibility of a
terminal disease might feel herself very late on that timescale. The idea of timescale should never be thought of as a simple matter of ‘objective’ calendar time or expectancy. This is a question for discourse analysis: How are the timescales constructed by the participants in the action under consideration?

Thus the basic timescale guiding question is: What are the material-physical timescales on which these cycles operate and how are those constructed discursively by the participants?

Follow-up questions would be these:

- What is a typical timescale for the people, discourses, places, and mediational means that are crucial to the action you are studying?
- How are these timescales constructed discursively and by whom?
- How much agreement is there about these constructions?
- Where in the cycle does this action occur? A person might apply for an immigration visa at the time when the local economy is lagging but the foreign economy is booming, but when the visa is issued a decade later those relationships might be reversed.
- Is this the first time this new object is used as a mediational means or is it comfortably adjusted to the person who is using it?
- What relationships or linkages are there among or across timescales? You might wear a new pair of shoes that are still not adjusted to your feet for a short social event but not for a long walk in the country.

Links and interactions among semiotic cycles

The original meaning of ‘nexus’ is a link between two different ideas or objects. In mapping the semiotic cycles of the people, discourses, places, and mediational means involved in the action you are studying, it is important to study not just the separate cycles but the links and interactions among them.

The central question is: How have just these elements come together at just this moment to produce this particular action?

Questions by which to expand this basic question are the following:

- Do some of these elements (or all of them) seem completely inevitable or completely accidental? Why are the inevitable ones so linked to this action?
- Are two practices always linked or only accidentally and sporadically? (Do you listen to a certain kind of music when you read a certain kind of magazine?)
- Do all participants see these linkages the same way?
- Does this person always use exactly this object as a mediational means in taking this action? (a favorite pen for writing, a ‘good luck’ pair of socks for playing baseball?)
- Are the links simply arbitrary and associational—you’ve just always done it that way (a particular kind of music that you want when you’re cooking dinner) or are they necessarily linked as part of a larger activity (you must pay with cash in this kind of store)?
- Are there incommensurabilities as well? That is, are there prohibited or impossible elements or linkages?
- How are these ‘present’ in the situation? Are they just absent or is there explicit discourse concerning their absence?
Transformations and resemiotizations

Actions often transform a cycle from one kind of action/object or discourse into another. An agenda written on paper may become a sequence of topics that are discussed orally at a meeting. That oral discussion then becomes a decision that is recorded in written minutes of the meeting. Those minutes are then the basis of discussion among an executive group which makes a written policy statement. That policy statement then becomes a mediational means by which following actions are taken. In each case the semiotic cycle is transformed from (or resemiotized to use Iedema’s useful term) from one semiotic mode to another, from text to speech and back to text, and then into objects, for example.

Re-examine each of the points you have mapped on each cycle to see if there are places in which the actions accomplish a transformation or resemiotization from action to mediational means to further action. Do not get stuck on just following physical objects or concepts, discourses, or just people and their actions. Be alert to changes of state in these semiotic cycles. Many important aspects of nexus analysis are tied up in this point. A car is, in this sense, the resemiotization of an enormous complex of engineer’s discourses, resource extraction and manufacturing actions and discourses, and a worldwide system of trade and financial exchange. As a mediational means for the action of driving to the store, a car carries along with it a very complex and multiply resemiotized set of discourses and actions.

From the point of view of transformation and resemiotization the most important question is this: Is the action under examination a point at which resemiotization or semiotic transformation occurs?

Questions preliminary to asking this question are:

- What anticipations on the part of which key social actors lead up to this action?
- What emanates from this action?
- To what extent is the action embedded in historical body in different ways for the participants involved? and do these differences provide a source for transformation and resemiotization?

Circumferences

Actions are part of larger activities and activity systems, and those are part of even larger entities we call life histories or histories or eras. Each of the semiotic cycles that constitute a nexus of practice may work on a different timescale. The idea of ‘circumferencing’ the action you are studying is to try to follow the circumference for each cycle far enough that you can include the most important elements that give meaning to the action as well as to see the points at which semiotic transformations or resemiotizations are happening.

The guiding circumferencing question is: What are the narrowest and widest timescales on which this action depends?

In thinking about how to follow these circumferences, keep in mind the following questions:

- Is the action limited in some way by the circumference set by participants, discourses, objects, places, etc.? A physician’s examination that must be completed within 12 – 15 minutes may be extremely limited in its ability to take note of processes that cannot be observed within the cardiac-respiratory
timescale. For wider circumferencing the doctor is dependant on
discourse—largely the questions and answers of the medical history.

- Do all participants agree on the most relevant timescale or circumference?
- How are conflicts resolved and by whom?

How to proceed

We have just outlined a set of questions that we know are difficult to investigate or to try to answer in any complete way. We suggest that you should make broad-stroke maps of the nexus of practice to begin with. Then select some cycles to follow out along their circumferences—the historical body of a person, a practice, a sequence of actions in an activity, a discourse that looks promising. Your purpose is to open up the circumference beyond the narrow circadian limits of much discourse analysis over the course from March to October through a wider circumference studies.

Sketch out the history of the participants, the mediational means, the discourses, and the place and set an approximate circumference. You probably do not need to know the history of medicine back to Hippocrates to decide that a 15-minute doctor-patient medical exam is probably too short to grasp the full trajectories of the actions involved. But you probably also do not need a full analysis of contemporary economic conditions and practices to see that it would be difficult to very quickly alter that particular nexus of practice.

Once you have sketched out the main lines and cycles which constitute the mediated action in which you are interested, the most effective way to proceed is to start with what you can learn from the participants about their own cycles (with observations, interviews, focus groups) as a guide to where to look earlier in the process. Be particularly attentive to anticipations (see discourse analysis and motive analysis):

- How do they talk about why they have come to take this action?
- What history do they see it as the outcome of; what future is it projected toward? Compare: ‘I always have coffee at this time of day’ and ‘I need a cup of coffee because I have a big meeting coming up in 20 minutes’. The first locates the motive for the action within the agent and his/her historical body, the second locates the motive as an anticipation of what is yet to come.

In any event it is important to study some sequence of actions or some participants longitudinally over the eight months from March to October. You are looking for repeated sequences of actions, the transformations of discourse to action or from action to discourse. The easiest and most effective way to do this is to simply become committed to working within the nexus of practice toward the achievement of some definite outcome and then carefully mapping the life history of that action.

This will inevitably lead to the discover of other crucial points in the circumference of the semiotic cycles you are studying. Each of those is a new nexus of practice that you might study with its own semiotic cycles circulating through it. In each case you will need to then decide whether it is more fruitful to follow out those new cycles or to return to your focus on your original semiotic ecosystem, your original nexus of practice. There is no certain answer to which direction you should take. This is a judgment you will have to make as part of your own participation in this nexus of practice. What is clear is that whether you follow out a new cycle or continue back to the original nexus of practice, that choice in itself will transform what you will learn and how you will participate in the nexus of practice.
Probably the most important points to be alert for are those moments along any one of the cycles (persons, places, mediational means, practices, discourses) in which a transformation or resemiotization occurs. There tends to be a certain irreversibility about those moments which make it easier for actions to go forward rather than to return to reconsider. Those are also the moments in the cycles of a nexus analysis at which it is most likely that you could bring about social change because those are the moments at which changes are already occurring.

Discourse analysis

Discourse is present throughout a nexus analysis in at least six forms:

- Speech of the participants in mediated actions (whether foregrounded or backgrounded),
- Texts used as mediational means (whether foregrounded or backgrounded) such as books, magazines, train schedules, street signs, logos and brand names, directions for use on packages and other objects,
- Images and other semiotic systems used as mediational means (pictures, gestures, manner of dressing, design of buildings and other places, works of art as focal points or as decorations),
- Submerged in the historical body of the participants and in the practices in which they engage,
- Submerged in the design of the built environment and objects,
- Speech or writing or images of the analysts in conducting the nexus analysis (either within or apart from the moment of the mediated action)

The discourse analysis you will want to conduct on these six types of discourse will vary as widely as these types of discourse, of course. Mediated discourse analysis finds it useful to organize a discourse analysis around three main types of interrogation of the data as these are derived from critical discourse analysis, interactional sociolinguistics, and linguistic anthropology.

Critical Discourse Analysis is primarily concerned with questions of power between social interests in society and so critical discourse analysts most frequently work from the point of view of a social semiotic analysis of texts, speech, and images as reflexes of power interests.

From this point of view the main question you would want to bring to each of these six forms of discourse is: How are social power interests produced in this discourse?

Thus from this point of view you would want to ask of all of the material in the six different forms of discourse noted above:

- What are the big ‘D’ discourses present in this discourse? For example, the academic discourse of discourse analysis is inevitably present in any nexus analysis and so power relations between academics and other social groups within that society are also present.
- How are those discourses ‘present’ as overt (texts, talk, logos, signs, books, objects, technologies, people, etc.) and how are they submerged (as practice or historical body)? What power is implied in some participants (like the analyst) keeping notes and making recordings?
- What hidden discourses and dialogicalities are there? That is, what’s not being said, being evaded, or so obvious that it’s virtually invisible but nevertheless governing the entire action – activity?
• Where the discourses are overtly present, how are they designed and produced both in the sense of the material design and the sense of the social interests invested in their design?
• What are the systemic and power relations among the modes in which discourses are present?

_Interactional sociolinguistics_ is primarily focused on interpersonal relationships, participation structure, positioning, alignments and identities. Although this work is often based mostly on talk, it is clear that participants in speech events also take up positions and alignments in relationship to the places they are in and the objects they are using in those places.

From this point of view the governing question is: _What positions and alignments are participants taking up in relationship to each other, to the discourses in which they are involved, the places in which these discourses occur, and to the mediatinal means they are using, and the mediated actions which they are taking?_

Questions which will suggest lines of discourse analysis to follow are:

• How are cohesion, reference, topical relevance, etc. managed? (i.e. single-topic classroom discourse as opposed to multi-threaded computer-mediated discourse).
• How are alignments achieved in taking actions, particularly in moments of resemiotization?
• How are the participants in the nexus analysis positioned in respect to the analyst conducting the discourse analysis? This is particularly important in the opening stage of a nexus analysis (Engaging the nexus of practice)?
• What participation frameworks within what interaction orders are used to achieve consensual alignments at points of transformation? What genres such as narrative or conversation, or what styles and registers?

)Linguistic anthropology has carried forward the interest in examining the relationships between language and culture on the one hand and between those and thought on the other. The primary strategy in examining these perennial questions consists of a very close analysis of the structures of the language used (grammatical, lexical, morphological, semantic, and genre) and through a broad comparative – contrastive analysis.

For a nexus analysis the central question here is: _How are sociocultural or historical thought or cultural patterns in the language and its genres and registers providing a template for the mediated actions of participants in the nexus of practice?_

Many of the most stimulating questions can be developed out of the traditional questions of the ethnography of communication such as:

• What genres, registers, keys are used by participants in taking this action?
• What kinds of speech events and speech situations are taken for granted or presupposed by the participants (including the analyst)? For example, is it common experience or rare for the participants to be tape recorded or video recorded as they act?
• How is this ‘same’ action carried out by other people in other social groups and at other times and places? Can the action be said to be playing out of cultural or social scripts?
• If there is reason to believe that there are social or cultural scripts, how have these been internalized as mediatinal means for taking this action?
• **Most obviously**, what languages are used in taking an action; are they the same or different from the language of analysis; does that make a difference in the templates being developed to analyze the action?

All of these discourse analysis questions should be asked of each of the six forms of discourse you find through your nexus analysis.

**Motive analysis**

Kenneth Burke’s *Grammar of Motives* proposes that any action can be imagined and therefore talked about from any one of five points of view: The scene, the social actor (Burke’s ‘agent’), the mediational means (Burke’s ‘agency’), the mediated action (Burke’s ‘act’), and the purpose. Each of these points of view form an explanatory position or a discursive motive for the action. The Figure A.3 shows these five explanatory positions.

![Burke's pentad of motives](pentad.png)

A person who uses new media technology in conducting his business might explain this in terms of scene (what lies outside or prior to him or his interests) by saying he uses this technology because this is the how people are doing things now. Or he might ascribe his motive to the social actor (himself, in this case) by saying that he is using this new technology because he wants to develop his own ability in this area. He could also explain his actions from the point of view of the mediational means by saying that it’s the only means he has at his disposal for accomplishing his task. A motive that was located in the purpose would be to say something like, ‘Even though I don’t much like these new technologies, it’s the most efficient way to get business done.’ Perhaps more rarely, an action is explained in terms of the action itself, or an action sequence: ‘It just seems like one thing led to another.’

A motive analysis is an aspect of discourse analysis which seeks to understand how participants, including the analyst, are positioning themselves in giving explanations for actions—are they taking on full responsibility, are they displacing responsibility to society or ‘people’, or perhaps to technology, or are they giving a purely goal-driven (purpose) explanation? Or are they, as in the last case, just claiming that things have just happened?

The goal of a motive analysis is *not to try to establish any fundamental underlying or ‘true’ motive*. The purpose of a motive analysis is twofold: 1) You want to establish how participants characterize actions and their explanations, and 2) You want to engage in those characterizations to see if taking a different perspective may change the nature of the actions themselves.
From this we can derive the basic question that should govern your motive analysis:

*How do participants ascribe and allocate motives for their actions among the elements of a nexus analysis?*

- For each trajectory, person, object, etc. how is the grammar of motives exploited to account for or explain actions?
- How might it have been otherwise? It is a useful strategy simply to rephrase an explanation that is given as having an alternative motive.
- How much agreement is there among participants in ascribing or imputing these motives and explanations?
- What representative anecdotes, metaphors drive these actions?
- It is particularly important to look for shifts in the motive schemes being used. ‘I wanted to do X because of Y (scene), but as it turned out, I really hated it (agent).

Of course a motive analysis should be fully integrated within your discourse analysis from the start of the project. When you set out to initially identify your significant mediated action(s) upon which to focus, it is very likely that public discourse sources will consider that an action is motivated in very different ways from the ways individual social actors might motivate it. A public discourse source which is critical of international fast food chains might say the action of eating a hamburger in Hong Kong is motivated by worldwide globalizing economics (scene), a source favorable to such economic entities might also attribute it to a scenic motive by saying it is because it is economical and nutritious food. A person buying and eating a hamburger in Hong Kong might say it reminds her of home (social actor motive). The point for a nexus analysis is that none of these is the true motive but the ascription of motive itself is a discursive strategy by which social actors position themselves in relationship to the actions which they take.
3. Changing the nexus of practice

November - December: In engaging the nexus of practice you located yourself as a participant in the nexus of practice which you are trying to understand and change. From the beginning your activities are part of the common activities of that nexus of practice. And you have begun to navigate the cycles of the nexus of practice through your work of documentation and analysis. These activities are actions such as recording, talking, writing, and acting through making documents, images, and other mediational means and through doing your discourse analysis. A nexus analysis departs from traditional ethnographic research by making these communications become actions which occur within the nexus of practice. A nexus analysis not only positions the analyst within the nexus of practice, it brings the other participants into the nexus analysis.

The final two months of a 12-month nexus analysis are given over to analyzing change in the nexus of practice through re-engagement. This may occur through direct actions which are motivated by the nexus analysis or through engaging in the negotiations with that nexus of practice of bring your analysis and understanding back into the semiotic ecosystem. Figure A.1 which we presented at the outset of this fieldguide sketches out these ongoing relationships. We have located these activities here in the final two months only because it is at this time that you will have available the widest range of materials with which to do this re-engagement.

To put this in the terms we have discussed as navigating the nexus of practice, a nexus analysis begins by identifying crucial mediated actions and then begins to resemiotize or to bring about a semiotic transformation of those actions through the discursive activities of mapping the trajectories of people and places, mediational means and discourses, which constitute the mediated action. Those new mapping and analytical discourses are then further resemiotized as actions and mediational means which in the end become part of the historical body, interaction order, and discourses in place of the nexus of practice itself.

Actions

One of the major ways in which the discourse analyst engages a nexus of practice and navigates within it is through the study of the discursive construction of motives and through negotiating a re-analysis of those motives.

This leads to the crucial final (and of course the first) question of a nexus analysis: What actions can you take as a participant-analyst in this nexus of practice that will transform discourses into actions and actions into new discourses and practices?

This may be elaborated by asking:

- How does the discourse of nexus analysis enter into your nexus as one of the semiotic cycles?
- How is this cycle shifted or given further impetus?
- How is it transformed or resemiotized from discourse into action into mediational means that participants may use as the basis for further actions?