

MediatedDiscourse

[*The nexus of practice*]

RON SCOLLON

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Mediated Discourse

‘This book advances the field, challenges present conceptions, is well written and well grounded in relevant theory.’

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‘This well-argued text locates itself in the nexus of discussions concerning critical discourse analysis, cultural studies, practice and social theories. It is a unique turn in a pivotal discussion that will be of interest to a broad range of scholars.’

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Mediated Discourse: The nexus of practice sets out a discursive theory of human action.

Language and action are intimately related. The difficult question to answer is *how* they are related. Mediated Discourse Theory looks into social relationships to see how the use of language is both a form of action in itself and is also indirectly related to all other forms of human action.

Through the empirical study of a one-year-old child learning to exchange objects with caregivers, Scollon challenges the commonly held claim that all practices are represented in discourse and that all discourse has the function of structuring practice.

Calling upon work in interactional sociolinguistics, critical discourse analysis, anthropological linguistics, sociocultural psychology, and intercultural communication, the Mediated Discourse Theory set out in this book resolves current problematic issues such as how practices are learned across the boundaries of groups and how individuals come to be socialized as social actors.

Ron Scollon is Professor of Linguistics at Georgetown University. His books include *Conversations with a One Year Old*; *Narrative, Literacy and Face in Interethnic Communication*; *Mediated Discourse as Social Interaction*; and *Intercultural Communication: A Discourse Approach*.



Ron Scollon and Brenda Wong. Photograph by Suzanne Wong Scollon.

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Preface

It was a much younger researcher than this author who crawled around on his hands and knees clutching the microphone of a Sony TC110A following a one-year-old baby as she first began to work out how to find and hold her place conversationally within her world. That baby has recently finished law school and the data collected back then have been transported across oceans and continents. So it was with some mixture of hope and anxiety that I took one of the original tapes out of its box and listened to it to see if the original materials were still usable for a new study.

In discussions with colleagues, notably Ruth Wodak, during the Fall of 1999 I began to feel that social theory, particularly practice theory, was badly in need of an ontogenetic view of social practice. In linguistics, following the earlier model of psychology, it has proved to be a very rich source of insights into social process to watch the earliest development of social and psychological processes longitudinally in the opening years of life. A quick survey of the field showed me that there had been no studies which had directly taken on the challenge of studying the ontogenesis of a single social practice, which we could use to shed light on the closely related question of the aggregation of the habitus in a person in the course of living. I had hoped that I would be able to find in my original material sufficient data to say something interesting about practices of ownership and appropriation because of an ongoing interest in questions of intellectual property.

The longitudinal study of infants is a difficult kind of work which, for many cogent reasons, is often best carried out by the young parents of the children under study. With no grandchildren imminent, I had hoped and was excited to discover that my original tapes had remained in perfect condition, that the hundreds of hours of transcription of 'everything everyone said and did' had produced abundant observations which were useful much beyond the original purposes of my earlier research, and that the scores of photographs and other contextual notes taken by my colleague and wife, Suzanne Scollon, also remained in perfect condition so that I was able to undertake this new study of these archived materials. As it turned out, I found the study of the practices of ownership and appropriation far too complex to address immediately and as the file of notes grew fatter, I realized that I would have to focus even more elementally on just one single practice, the practice of handing an object from one person to

another. This practice is implicated in many actions of ownership and of appropriation, of course, but I have found it enough to focus on just this one practice to develop the ideas I have presented in this book. The fuller set of questions surrounding the practices at the foundation of questions of intellectual property will have to wait for development in subsequent projects.

The primary research on which this study is based was conducted in 1972 and in the years following through 1977. I would like to thank once again the participants for their patience with me in doing this work, especially, of course, Brenda Wong. Many of the topics treated in this book were first presented to my classes in Mediated Discourse at Georgetown University. I am particularly indebted to Cecilia Castillo-Ayometzi, Sylvia Chou, Mirjana Nelson Dedaic, Ingrid de Saint-Georges, Michelle Dunne, Alex Johnston, Chris LaFargue, Philip Levine, Cecilia Magadan, Sigrid Norris, Tom Randolph, John Taylor, Jeff Young, Vicki Yung, and Chiara Zucconi who provided the stimulating environment for the discussion of these ideas in class. Tom Randolph in particular read several drafts in close detail and was most helpful in getting both words and ideas straight. Members of the Asian Sociocultural Research Projects group, also at Georgetown University, gave important feedback on many of the ideas presented here. Marilyn Merritt was particularly helpful in raising questions from a point of view outside of practice theory.

I have profited much from extended discussions of these ideas with Ruth Wodak who visited at the Georgetown University linguistics department during the Fall Semester of 1999 when the bulk of this work was being prepared. I am also grateful to Jim Wertsch, Jim Gee, and Norman Fairclough who in shorter visits stimulated much of the thinking which went into this research. Jim Wertsch and Lilie Chouliaraki also read portions of the manuscript and made very useful and insightful comments. David Barton, Gunther Kress, and Sandy Silberstein, who read the manuscript for Routledge, returned very helpful comments which have materially improved both the ideas and the presentation. As the publishing business continues to respond to market pressures for ever more textbooks, I am also very grateful to Louisa Semlyen at Routledge for being willing to support a book that addresses social theory through the analysis of the actions of a one-year-old child – surely a risk in today's market but I hope one which will prove to have been worth taking.

Chapter 1 was presented as a paper in the session on Mediated Discourse at the Sociolinguistics Symposium 2000, 'The Interface between Linguistics and Social Theory' University of the West of England (UWE), Bristol, 27–29 April 2000. An overview of this work focused on Chapter 2 was given as a talk to the workshop on Theory and Interdisciplinarity in Critical Discourse Analysis, Institute on Discourse, Identity, and Politics, University of Vienna, 6–7 July 2000 as a pre-session to the 7th International Pragmatics Conference in Budapest (9–14 July 2000). The ideas presented here have profited much from discussions in both of these venues and I wish to thank the participants, some of whom I do not know, for stimulating commentary.

Neither the original work nor this reconsideration could have been done

without the constant intellectual engagement with Suzanne Scollon. As will be clear in this analysis, she was far more than supportive in the original dissertation research – she was there to take field notes and photographs and to discuss virtually every aspect of this work as a co-researcher. Many of the ideas presented here were first developed in discussions with her and much of what one reads here first came up in discussions of her own current ethnographic project, *Pushing hands, pushing minds: Mediating transnational identity in a taijiquan group*. Our daughter Rachel, who was one of the children studied in the first instance, has now come full circle to offer highly insightful critical readings of this book in manuscript form.

With so much kind assistance and support from family, students, and colleagues one would think it difficult to fail to get it right. Nevertheless, I realize all too well that I have not been able to take into consideration all of the questions which these people have raised. They are not to be blamed for the weaknesses which have remained. It is my hope that the abundant infelicities in the argument which I have not been able to fix will only serve to stimulate new work by those younger and fresher.

1 Mediated discourse

A discursive theory of human action

Discourse and action: a cup of coffee

One morning recently in San Diego, California I had a cup of coffee at the international chain coffee shop, Starbucks®. After a short time in the queue I ordered a tall latte and another drink for my friend. I paid for the drinks and then waited a few minutes while the drinks were made and then delivered to me. We took the drinks and sat down to drink them and have a conversation. As linguists and perhaps only linguists do, in and among the other topics of conversation we talked about what was printed on the cup.

Mediated discourse analysis is a framework for looking at such actions with two questions in mind: What is the action going on here? and how does discourse figure into these actions? In a sense there is nothing very new or different about mediated discourse analysis in that it is a program of linkages among other well-established theoretical and methodological approaches. Mediated discourse analysis seeks to develop a theoretical remedy for discourse analysis that operates without reference to social actions on the one hand, and social analysis that operates without reference to discourse on the other. Virtually all of the theoretical elements have been proposed and developed in the work of others. In this mediated discourse analysis takes the position that social action and discourse are inextricably linked on the one hand (Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999) but that on the other hand these links are sometimes not at all direct or obvious, and therefore in need of more careful theorization.

In having this cup of coffee I could say there is just a single action – having a cup of coffee as is implied in the common invitation, ‘Let’s go have a cup of coffee.’ Or I could say there is a very complex and nested set of actions – queuing, ordering, purchasing, receiving the order, selecting a table, drinking coffee, conversing, disposing of our cups and other materials, and the rest. Likewise, I could say there is just one discourse here – a conversation among friends. Or I could say there are many complex discourses with rampant intertextualities and interdiscursive – international neo-capitalist marketing of coffee, service encounter talk, linguistic conference talk, family talk and the rest. Mediated discourse analysis is a position which seeks to keep all of this complexity alive in our analyses without presupposing which actions and which discourses are the relevant ones in any particular case under study.

2 *Mediated discourse*

As a way to at least temporarily narrow the scope of my analysis here, I want to focus on the coffee cup. It can be called the primary mediational means by which the coffee has been produced as something transferable, delivered to me, and ultimately consumed. Without the cup there is no «having a cup of coffee» in the literal sense. Throughout all the other actions which take place, the cup figures as the material line that holds this all together. From the point of view of an analysis of mediated action (Wertsch 1998), then, we would want to consider the cup – a paper one in this case – absolutely central to both the narrowly viewed actions of delivery or drinking and to the more broadly viewed actions of consumer purchasing/marketing or of «having a cup of coffee» as a conversational genre.

If we come to this social interaction from the point of view of discourse analysis, and if we set aside for the moment all of the complexities of service encounter talk and of casual conversation between friends, we still find that the cup itself (with its protective sleeve) is an impressive semiotic complex of at least seven different Discourses in the broad sense defined by Gee (1999).

- 1 Commercial branding: There is a world-wide recognizable logo which appears twice on the cup and once on the cardboard protective sleeve.
- 2 Legal: The logo is marked as a registered property (®) and the text on the sleeve is marked as copyrighted (©). A patent number is also given. In addition, there is a warning that the contents are ‘extremely hot’ which derives from a famous lawsuit against another international chain where a customer had held a paper cup of their coffee between his legs while driving and been uncomfortably scorched.
- 3 E-commerce: A website is given where the consumer can learn more, though it does not indicate what we might learn about.
- 4 Consumer correctness: An extended text tells us that the company cares for those who grow its coffee and gives a telephone number where the consumer can call to make a donation to CARE on behalf of plantation workers in Indonesia.
- 5 Environmental correctness: We are told that the sleeve is made of 60% recycled fiber and that it uses less material than would a second paper cup. The color scheme is in natural cardboard brown with green lettering which are widely associated with environmental friendliness.
- 6 Service information: There is a printed roster of possibilities (‘Decaf’, ‘Shots’, ‘Syrrup’, ‘Milk’, ‘Custom’, and ‘Drink’) and superimposed is the handwritten ‘L’ (for ‘latte’).
- 7 Manufacturing information: Under the cup around the inside rim is the information about the cup itself, its size, and product labeling and number.

On the one hand we have a fairly clear and mundane social action – having a cup of coffee in a coffee shop – and a semiotic complex of Discourses which are also, at least now at the beginning of this century, rather mundane. We have an array of analytical positions from which we can analyze this action, from seeing it

as participating in a bit of micro-social interaction to seeing it as participating in the world-wide consumer practices of neo-capitalism. At the same time we have an array of analytical positions from which we can analyze the Discourses represented in these texts printed on this coffee cup. The problem that mediated discourse analysis is trying to engage is how we are to work out a way to understand the relationships among the actions – drinking the cup of coffee – and the Discourses. Ethnographic observation leads us to believe that, on the whole, except for the odd linguist, the coffee is drunk without much attention being focused on this impressive discursive array on the cup.¹ Correspondingly, the literature has many analyses of such Discourses in public places, from the products of the news industry through to the broader popular culture industry, which make scant reference at all to the actual social situations in which these Discourses are engaged in social action. Mediated discourse analysis is an attempt to theorize a way in which we can link the Discourse of commercial branding, for example, with the practice of drinking a cup of coffee in conversation without giving undue weight either to the action without reference to the Discourse or to the Discourse without reference to the actions within which it is appropriated.

A few central concepts

A mediated discourse analysis gives central importance to five concepts:

- Mediated action
- Site of engagement
- Mediational means
- Practice
- Nexus of practice

Mediated action: The unit of analysis of a mediated discourse analysis is the mediated action (not the Discourse or text or genre). That is, the focus is on social actors *as they are acting* because these are the moments in social life when the Discourses in which we are interested are instantiated in the social world as social action, not simply as material objects. We use the phrase ‘mediated action’ to highlight the unresolvable dialectic between action and the material means which mediate all social action (Wertsch 1998). That is, we take the position that action is materially grounded in persons and objects and that it is unproductive to work with purely abstracted conceptual systems of representation. Participation in the world-wide consumer society requires at some point the transfer of coins and cups, speaking and drinking. Conversely stated, this transfer of coins and cups and speaking and drinking inevitably entails participating in the consumer society. There is no action without participating in such Discourses; no such Discourses without concrete, material actions.

A site of engagement: A mediated action occurs in a social space which I have elsewhere called a ‘site of engagement’ (Scollon 1998, 1999). This is the real-time

window that is opened through an intersection of social practices and mediational means (cultural tools)² that make that action the focal point of attention of the relevant participants. The idea of the site of engagement takes from practice/activity theory (as well as from interactional sociolinguistics) the insistence on the real-time, irreversible, and unfinalizable nature of social action. A mediated action is not a class of actions but a unique moment in history. Its interpretation is located within the social practices which are linked in that unique moment. The cup of coffee/coffee conversation in San Diego is theoretically taken as unique and unfolding in that moment and bears only a loose, indirect, and highly problematical relationship with another cup of coffee at a Starbucks® in San Luis Obispo among the same participants a week later, if for no other reason than the first is part of the history of the second.

Mediational means: A mediated action is carried out through material objects in the world (including the materiality of the social actors – their bodies, dress, movements) in dialectical interaction with structures of the habitus. We take these mediational means to always be multiple in any single action, to carry with them historical affordances and constraints, and to be inherently polyvocal, intertextual, and interdiscursive. Further, these multiple mediational means are organized in a variety of ways, either in hierarchical structures of activities or in relatively expectable relations of salience or importance.

While I have focused on the cup in this sketch, this cup of coffee has also equally entailed the physical spaces of the coffee shop, the coins and bills exchanged, the servers, the counters, the coffee machines, the tables and chairs, the other customers of the shop, the San Diego sunshine – a significant materiality of that particular action – and our own habitus, latte for me, chai latte for my friend. The polyvocality, intertextuality, and interdiscursivity of the cup has been noted above. To this we add the Southern California décor which sets this particular shop in its place on earth and departs so radically from the ‘same’ company’s shops in Washington, DC, Beijing, and London.

Practice and social structure: For this mediated action to take place in this way there is a necessary intersection of social practices and mediational means which in themselves reproduce social groups, histories, and identities. A mediated discourse analysis takes it that a mediated action is only interpretable within practices. From this point of view ‘having a cup of coffee’ is viewed as a different action in a Starbucks®, in a cafeteria, and at home. The difference lies both in the practices (how the order is made, for example) and in the mediational means (including the range from the espresso machines to the décor of the spaces in which the action is taken). That is to say, a mediated discourse analysis does not neutralize these practices and social structures as ‘context’, but seeks to keep them alive in our interpretations of mediated actions.

Nexus of practice: Mediated discourse analysis takes a tight or narrow view of social practice as social practices in the plural – ordering, purchasing, handing, and

receiving – and so then sees these as practices (as count nouns, not as a mass noun). These practices are linked to other practices, discursive and non-discursive, over time to form nexus of practice. So we might loosely at least want to talk about an early twenty-first century American ‘designer coffee shop’ nexus of practice which would provisionally include such things as pricing practices (high), ordering practices (the distinctions between *caffè latte*, *café au lait*, *regular coffee with milk*, *cappuchino*), drinking practices (alone with newspapers, in conversation with friends), discursive practices (being able to answer to ‘whole or skim?’), knowing that ‘tall’ means the smallest cup on sale or that ‘for here’ means in a porcelain cup rather than a paper one), physical spacing practices (that the queuing place and delivery place are different) and the rest.

The concept of the nexus of practice works more usefully than the concept of the community of practice which was the earlier framing (Scollon 1998) in that it is rather loosely structured as well as structured over time. That is, a nexus of practice, like practices themselves, is formed one mediated action at a time and is always unfinalized (and unfinalizable). The concept of the nexus of practice is unbounded (unlike the more problematical community of practice) and takes into account that at least most practices (ordering, purchasing, handing, and receiving) can be linked variably to different practices in different sites of engagement and among different participants. From this point of view, the practice of handing an object to another person may be linked to practices which constitute the action of purchasing in a coffee shop, it may be linked to practices which constitute the action of giving a gift to a friend on arriving at a birthday party, or even to handing a bit of change to a panhandler on the street. Mediated discourse analysis takes the position that it is the constellation of linked practices which makes for the uniqueness of the site of engagement and the identities thus produced, not necessarily the specific practices and actions themselves.

This mediated action of having a cup of coffee and the concurrent and dialogically chained prior and subsequent mediated actions could be analyzed with a great deal more care than I have been able to do here. My purpose has been simply to make these five points:

- The mediated action (within a dialogical chain of such social actions as well as within a hierarchy of simultaneously occurring practices) is the focus of mediated discourse analysis.
- The focus is on real-time, irreversible, one-time-only actions rather than objectivized, categorical analyses of types of action or discourses and texts.
- An action is understood as taking place within a site of engagement which is the real-time window opened through an intersection of social practices and mediational means.
- The mediational means are multiple in any case and inevitably carry histories and social structures with them.
- A mediated action produces and reproduces social identities and social structures within a nexus of practice.

Theoretical principles

It is only with some trepidation that I suggest that mediated discourse analysis is a theory, as that word tends to evoke emotional responses only surpassed perhaps by ‘patriotism’ or ‘plagiarism’. Nevertheless, I believe it is important to seek to make one’s claims clear and then proceed with the business of discovering what is wrong with them. Here I will articulate three principles which organize mediated discourse theory. The three main principles are the principles of social action, communication, and history. I would argue that the second two are simply tautological or definitional extensions of the first principle, as are the corollaries. I make no claim that these principles are unique to mediated discourse; indeed, it is my hope that the only originality, if there is originality at all in these ideas, is in the degree of explicitness of the underlying principles I am trying to achieve.³

PRINCIPLE ONE: *The principle of social action: Discourse is best conceived as a matter of social actions, not systems of representation or thought or values.*

Mediated discourse theory – to the extent it is a theory – is a theory about social action with a specific focus on discourse as a kind of social action as well as upon discourse as a component of social action. This principle should be recognized as an assertion of a value. That is, ‘best conceived’ is intended to mean ‘best conceived for my purposes’ which are to come to understand how action in society is possible and to what extent discourse plays a significant role in social action. A theory with an interest in the abstract formal structures of language, of which we seem to have a surplus, would be ‘best conceived’ as something else.

COROLLARY ONE: *The ecological unit of analysis*

The proper unit of analysis for a theory of social action is, tautologically, the social action, or as I prefer to phrase it, the mediated action; that is, the person or persons in the moment of taking an action along with the mediational means which are used by them form the ‘ecological’ unit of analysis, the unit of analysis in which the phenomenon exists, changes, and develops through time (Bateson 1972).

COROLLARY TWO: *Practice: All social action is based in tacit, normally non-conscious actions.*

‘Practice’ is the term most commonly used to refer to common action-in-the-world. I follow scholars such as Nishida (1958), Bateson (1972), and Bourdieu (1977 and 1990) in taking practice, not theory, as the milieu of social action.

COROLLARY THREE: *Habitus: The basis of social action is the habitus (Bourdieu 1977, 1990) or the historical-body (Nishida 1958): an individual’s accumulated experience of social actions.*

This constitutes a rephrasing of Corollary Two; a restatement or elaboration of the idea of practice. The word ‘practice’ focuses on the specific types of action(s); the word ‘habitus’ focuses on the individual’s aggregate experience of practices.

COROLLARY FOUR: Positioning (identity claims): All social actions occur within a nexus of practice which makes implicit or explicit claims to the social groups and positions of all participants – speakers, hearers, and those talked about or in front of.

As social action is based in habitus and habitus is the aggregation of history in concrete, sociocultural circumstances, any action which is taken reproduces (and claims, imputes, contests, and recontextualizes) the identities of prior social actions as well as negotiates new positions among the participants within this nexus of practice.

COROLLARY FIVE: Socialization: Because all social actions position the participants, all communications have the effect of socialization to nexus of practice.

This is a rephrasing of Corollary Four with the focus shifted from the positioning of individuals to those positions as aspects of group membership. As I use the term, a nexus of practice is a network or matrix of linked practices which are the basis of the identities we produce and claim through our social actions.

COROLLARY SIX: Othering: Because of the principle of socialization, all communications have the simultaneous effect of producing ‘others’ who are identified by not being members of the relevant nexus of practice.

Another rephrasing of Corollary Four with the focus shifted towards those who are produced as outsiders to the relevant nexus of practice.

PRINCIPLE TWO: The principle of communication: The meaning of the term ‘social’ in the phrase ‘social action’ implies a common or shared system of meaning. To be social an action must be communicated.

This principle is tautologically developed from the first principle by definition.

COROLLARY ONE: Mediational means: The production of shared meanings is mediated by a very wide range of mediational means or cultural tools such as language, gesture, material objects, and institutions which are carriers of their sociocultural histories. ‘Mediation’ refers to this process. ‘Mediated discourse’ redundantly reminds us that all actions and all discourse are mediated.

This corollary is terminological in that it introduces the term ‘mediational means’ (or the nearly alternative term ‘cultural tool’) for any semiotic object used to mediate social action. Language and discourse are, of course, of primary interest to mediated discourse, but there is no principled avoidance of non-verbal

communication, multi-modal communication, or, indeed, architecture, urban planning, or institutions as there tends to be in language-centered theories.

COROLLARY TWO: Organization of mediational means: The multiple mediational means involved in a mediated action are related to each other in complex ways.

This corollary indicates that multiple means are not just accidental aggregates, but that some mediational means will be more salient, preferred, emotionally engaging or otherwise stand in complex relations to each other as well as in relationship to the site of engagement under consideration.

PRINCIPLE THREE: The principle of history: ‘Social’ means ‘historical’ in the sense that shared meaning derives from common history or common past.

This principle and its corollaries are further terminological and definitional extensions of the principle of social action. I will not comment further about them here.

COROLLARY ONE: Interdiscursivity: Because of the principle of history, all communication is positioned within multiple, overlapping, and even conflicting discourses.

COROLLARY TWO: Intertextuality: Because of the principle of history, all communications (particular utterances) borrow from other discourses and texts and are, in turn, used in later discourses.

COROLLARY THREE: Dialogicality (or conversational or practical inference): Because of the principle of history, all communications respond to prior communications and anticipate following communications.

Why mediated discourse?

Perhaps it is obvious that many scholars in interactional sociolinguistics, critical discourse analysis, anthropological linguistics or linguistic anthropology, socio-cultural psychology, the sociology of language, new literacy studies, and practice theory as well as in yet other disciplines and research programs would find the principles I have just outlined entirely compatible with their work and with their theoretical orientation. If there is anything at all distinctive about mediated discourse theory (MDT) it is just in the attempt to find a central theoretical position and a unifying unit of analysis which can bring work in these several areas into engagement so that the particular focus will be on the mediated action. By referring to this reorganization as MDT I believe we can exploit the ambiguity in the term ‘mediated discourse’ to good effect. As I have suggested above, I take it in agreement with Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999) that any social action is mediated and that it is significantly discursive. MDT seeks to keep the focus upon the concrete, real-time social action and to see these social actions as fundamentally

discursive. If the theory makes any grand claim, it is simply that it will be valuable to the project of trying to understand social life and social change to organize our research around the moments in which social actions take place and to organize this research as discursive research.

In this focus on concrete, real-time social actions and social change MDT owes much to theory and practice in interactional sociolinguistics and conversation analysis. We find the concept of conversational inference particularly important to the understanding of such social actions (Gumperz 1977), though I might prefer to call this ‘practical’ inference to emphasize the grounding in practice and therefore the non-theoretical, non-analytical, non-conscious, non-objectivizing nature of this process of sense-making in action. At the same time, however, MDT takes the point made by Bourdieu (1977, 1990) and others that any instance of concrete, real-time social action is simultaneously the production and reproduction of the structures of the social world and, therefore, must be conceptualized in a way that takes the sociocultural histories of our habitus and of our mediational means (Wertsch 1998) into account. These analytical traditions share much with Nishida’s (1958) ‘philosophy of nothingness’, particularly the concepts of the historical-body, *rekishi-teki-shintai* (Bourdieu’s habitus) and action-intuition, *koi-teki-chokkan* (Wertsch’s mediated action).⁴

In this, MDT brings together practice theory on the one hand and the close linguistic analysis of social interactions on the other.⁵ I take it that each of these perspectives contributes a significant strengthening of the other once the points of contention are resolved in the focus on the social action.

In any case, I would argue that interactional sociolinguistics and critical discourse analysis (including the more general sociological practice theory of Bourdieu and even Foucault) works with an implied but not well-developed psychological theory. This has led in some cases to profound but unanalyzed differences between cognitive-based and basically rationalist analyses of social interaction and sociocultural, activity theory accounts of human learning and action. In my view sociocultural or sociohistorical psychology within the Vygotsky–Lurian tradition⁶ (Wertsch 1998, Cole 1995) is highly compatible with the position taken by MDT that learning proceeds from social interaction through processes of social interaction to the reproduction on the intramental plane of human psychological structures. In my view MDT is considerably strengthened by seeking to theorize more clearly the relationship between human psychological process and social structure through the focus on mediated social action.

MDT, finally, hopes to bring to its projects insights and methodology from three often unrelated fields – anthropological linguistics/linguistic anthropology⁷ new literacy studies, and intercultural communication. Work in anthropological linguistics has been particularly significant in the development of linguistics and discourse studies in North America beginning with the research of Boas and his students. One central issue of concern in anthropological linguistics has been the so-called Sapir/Whorf hypothesis. MDT joins with the general enthusiasm found in cultural studies and critical discourse analysis in the attempt to locate in discourse at least some of the effective mechanisms of social and cultural change.