

3. What is “basic” or “literal” meaning?

Basic or literal meaning is the core meaning of a word or combination of words that sets its possible range of meanings (which is much wider) when it is actually used in specific contexts. Thus, the word “cat” has a core meaning of “feline animal”, and “puppy” means “young dog”. In actual contexts of use these words can take on context-specific meanings that are related to their basic meanings, but “riff” on them or adjust them in ways appropriate to the context. Thus, “Don’t break the cat” can, in a specific context, mean “Don’t break the cat statue”; “The cat just passed the dog” could mean, in a specific context, a cat-shaped cloud passed a dog-shaped cloud. “All cats are vegetarians” means all of them. “Africa’s big cats are endangered” means only things like lions and tigers. Context-specific meanings, which adjust basic meanings based on the nature of the context, we call “situated meanings”.

Syntax allows speakers and writers to design or compose phrases, clauses, and sentences. It allows speakers and writers to combine words into big units. Any time speakers or writers combine words in certain ways—design in certain ways—they could have done it differently. There are almost always alternative ways to say (almost) “the same sort of thing”. So discourse analysts always ask “Why did a speaker or a writer say or write what he/she did the way he/she did and not in some possible alternative way that the language would have allowed?”. The choice a speaker or writer has made is part of what helps determine what situated meanings we as hearers, readers, or discourse analysts attribute to them.

I. Consider the alternatives below. In each case, say what difference it might make to say things one way rather than the other. Why might someone choose to say things one way or the other?

1a. I asked her to leave.

1b. I told her to leave.

1c. I demanded that she leave.

2a. John and Sue got married.

2b. Sue and John got married.

2c. Sue married John.

2d. John married Sue.

3a. The esteemed professor could discourse at great length about Latinate vocabulary in English.

3b. The respected professor could talk at length about Latin words in English.

4a. My favorite show was cancelled.

4b. My favorite show got cancelled.

4c. They cancelled my favorite show.

5a. They loaded hay on the wagon.

- 5b. They loaded the wagon with hay.
- 6a. Could you loan me 5 dollars?
- 6b. Would you loan me 5 dollars?
- 6c. Can you loan me 5 dollars?
- 6d. Will you loan me 5 dollars?
- 6e. Could I ask you to loan me 5 dollars?
- 6f. What would you say if I asked you to loan me 5 dollars?
- 7a. It is not what you say, but how you say it that really matters.
- 7b. How you say what you say is what really matters.
- 7c. It really matters how you say what you say.

II. Consider the examples below. Offer possible situated meanings for the underlined words. Situated meanings are meanings the words could take on in specific contexts of use, not just what the word means in a dictionary or in terms of its basic or literal meaning. Imagine different contexts in which the sentences below could have been said or written and how this would affect the situated (contextual) meaning of the underlined words:

1. The coffee spilled, go clean it up.
2. Relationships take work.
3. I have invested a lot in my children.

4. She is a revolutionary.
5. The people in this town are real Americans.
6. She is a real woman.
7. Science is his religion.
8. I have lots of friends on Facebook.
9. There is honor among thieves.
10. Janie is a good student.
11. Is the United States a true democracy?
12. One person's freedom fighter is another person's terrorist.

III. Consider the situations below and make up several different ways to say what you need to say. Think about what the differences mean and why you might choose one way over another:

1. You are driving as a passenger in the front seat of a car with a driver who is higher status than you. The driver has the window down and you are cold. Ask the driver to close the window.
2. You are in a college course and you think a grade you have gotten on an assignment is wrong or unfair. Go to the professor's office and ask the professor to change your grade.
3. Someone you know, but not particularly well, says something that you

find racist. Tell the person how you feel.

4. You need a loan. How would you ask a friend for a loan?

5. You are a boss and need to fire an employee who has tried hard, but just is not doing a good job. What would you say to fire the employee?

6. You are a doctor and have to tell a patient they have a serious form of cancer and may not have long to live. How would you tell the patient?

7. People at 50 and beyond are supposed to get colonoscopies to screen for colon cancer, a disease that can be readily cured if found early, but which can kill if found too late. People do not like the idea of colonoscopies and often put it off, some to their own dismay when they develop serious symptoms of cancer. How would you try to convince a parent to get a colonoscopy? How would you try to convince someone who you do not know well, but told you in a friendly conversation they were putting it off?

IV. One job of discourse analysis is to ask why things were said as they were and not in some other way. This includes why words were combined into single sentences in the way they were and not in some other way the grammar of the language would allow. A second job of discourse analysis is to ask why information was put into one sentence, rather than several, or, on the other hand, why information was put into several sentences

rather than one. So, we can ask why say 1a below rather than 1b or vice-versa? Why say this block of information as one sentence or two (or more)?

1a. Repeated ideologically driven political interventions in our schools are bringing about the destruction of the American school system.

1b. Politicians have repeatedly intervened in our schools based on their political ideologies. These efforts are bringing about the destruction of the American school system.

1. One traditional exercise that brings to the fore questions about how and why to combine information into one or more sentences is “Sentence Combining”. Here is an example of Sentence Combining from Richard Nordquist (see: <http://grammar.about.com/od/tests/a/introsc.htm>). If you want to know more about Sentence Combining, read Nordquist’s wonderful site:

Start by looking at this list of eight short (and repetitive) sentences:

She was our Latin teacher.

We were in high school.

She was tiny.

She was a birdlike woman.

She was swarthy.

She had dark eyes.

Her eyes were sparkling.

Her hair was graying.

Now try combining those sentences into three, two, or even just one clear and coherent sentence: in the process of combining, omit repetitive words and phrases (such as “She was”) but keep all of the original details.

Have you succeeded in combining the sentences? If so, compare your work with these sample combinations:

Our Latin teacher in high school was a tiny woman. She was swarthy and birdlike. She had dark, sparkling eyes and graying hair.

When we were in high school, our Latin teacher was a tiny woman. She was swarthy and birdlike, with dark, sparkling eyes and graying hair.

Our high school Latin teacher was a swarthy, birdlike woman. She was tiny, with dark, sparkling eyes and graying hair.

Our Latin teacher in high school was a birdlike woman, tiny and swarthy, with graying hair and dark, sparkling eyes.

Remember, there's no single correct combination. In fact, there are usually several ways to combine sentences in these exercises. After a little practice, however, you'll discover that some combinations are clearer and more effective than others.

Nordquist used the sentence below as his original model for this exercise:

Our high school Latin teacher was a tiny, birdlike woman, swarthy, with sparkling dark eyes, graying hair. (Charles W. Morton, *It Has Its Charm*)

Discuss why each version Nordquist gives might be used and how each version might differ in meaning and nuance from each other. Do you think Morton's sentence is the best single sentence version? Can you think of others?

2. Consider the two texts below (the first was an answer to an interview question; the answer was printed in an article) about why people often refuse to accept conclusions that conflict with their political beliefs even when they have evidence to the contrary or could easily compute results that would contradict their beliefs:

1a. Either they're intuiting an incorrect answer that is politically convenient and feels right to them, leading them to inquire no further—or else they're stopping to calculate the correct

answer, but then refusing to accept it and coming up with some elaborate reason why $1 + 1$ doesn't equal 2 in this particular instance.

1b. There are two possibilities. First, they may be intuiting an incorrect answer that is politically convenient for them. It feels right to them and so they inquire no further. Second, they may be stopping to calculate the correct answer and then refuse to accept it. So they come up with some elaborate reason why $1 + 1$ doesn't equal 2 in this particular instance.

The first version is one sentence (and note that this is a speech-like sentence whether it was actually said or written as an answer to interview questions; it is loosely organized).

The second is five sentences. What difference does it make to say or write 1 versus 2?

Can you put 1 into more than one and less than 5 sentences?

V. A third job of discourse analysis is ask how the order in which things were said or written matters and how it seeks to guide meaning, interpretation, and readers' or listeners' responses. Consider the two passages below. Do not worry about whether anything they say is or is not accurate right now, nor about whether you agree or disagree with them. Our job as discourse analysts is first to understand how people think, mean, and value, not to determine whether or not what they say is true. Of course, this does not mean truth is not important in other respects or after we have gained understanding.

When something someone writes or says is false, we cannot always tell whether they believe it, they are lying, or they do not care. All we often know is that it is significant to the meaning they want to make, the response they want to get from their readers or listeners, and to what they want to accomplish in the world.

The first passage I took from a banner a group had put up on the campus where I teach. The second is from an article that is about recent research that shows that people—educated and less educated—often get evidence or numbers wrong when the correct results would conflict with a strongly held political belief. I have numbered some parts of each text. I want you to consider how order works in terms of the parts I have numbered.

How does order work in each case? What do you think the author is trying to achieve by ordering things this way? What sort of response do you think each author is trying to get from readers? How does seeking to create emotion or affect work in each passage? How do claimed facts work in each passage? Is there a sense in which each passage is trying to “manipulate” or “manage” the reader? How does order work in all these respects?

DARWIN

(1) Charles Darwin rocked the world when his book, *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*, was published in 1859. He sought to explain how the incredible diversity of life could come about by natural means, without needing intervention by a supernatural being. (2) Atheists, agnostics, and skeptics believed they finally had an answer that would let them explain the world without a

Creator God. (3) Thus when Darwin proposed that species originate from other species, he was seen as taking direct aim at *Genesis*, which teaches that life reproduces after its own kind. (4) Today everyone recognizes that species can and do change. When Darwin proposed his theory he had no idea for how living things changed and no knowledge of genes or genetics. Today, studies in genetics reveal that such change is limited to using the information *already present* within the gene pool of a reproducing population. (5) Creationists see this limit as defining the boundaries of the *Genesis kind*. They also see this evidence as increasingly demonstrating that Darwin's powerful idea actually doesn't work in the real world. (6) Darwin is a hero to those who refuse to believe in and honor their Creator. But the dark side of Darwin is rarely acknowledged, modern evolutionists are rightfully embarrassed by his belief that both blacks and women are less evolved than Caucasian males. His ideas concerning eugenics were widely embraced by evolutionists until the Holocaust in Europe horrified people. (7) Today, theories about evolution have changed significantly since the time of Darwin. In the same way that it would be unfair to associate modern Christians with the Crusades, it would also be unfair to associate modern evolutionists with Hitler's Holocaust. (8) Nevertheless, if there is no God and if we are all just the result of unguided evolutionist processes, then it is fair to conclude that there are no moral absolutes. And if there are no moral absolutes, it is hard to explain why the Holocaust was wrong, though we know it was. (9) And don't you think it is also fair to ask if this line of thinking has led to our own American holocaust in which we have killed tens of millions of unborn babies in the name of "freedom"

and “choice”?

CLIMATE CHANGE

(1) It’s hard to look at climate change deniers as being anything other than willfully ignorant. (2) The numbers are right there: As surely as greenhouse gas emissions are rising, so are global temperatures. (3) To discount all that is to choose to be stupid.

(4) But according to Yale law professor Dan Kahan, it’s easier than we think for reasonable people to trick themselves into reaching unreasonable conclusions. (5) Kahan and his team found that, when it comes to controversial issues, people’s ability to do math is impacted by their political beliefs.

The second passage seems to me to seek to say, in part, that what seems logical may turn out to be wrong because a premise we have taken for granted is wrong. The second seems to me to seek to create a feeling of logical argument without really offering a logical (valid) argument. In what sense is the argument in 1 like the following arguments, neither of which are valid in technical logical terms? “If X were true, it would make me unhappy, thus X must not be true”. “If X were true, it would be bad for the world, so X is not true”. So, if the argument is not technically speaking “logical” (valid), what sort of argument is it?

Once you have sought to understand the meanings and goals of each passage, you can study how “truth” or “facts” work in the world. If you want to, look into enough biology

written by biologists to evaluate the truth of the claim: “Today, studies in genetics reveal that such change is limited to using the information *already present* within the gene pool of a reproducing population”. Keep in mind that sometimes a claim can be true in one sense, but not really supportive of the argument being made if it is understood in the right way. If you want, compare and contrast arguments from climate change believers and deniers, paying attention to the affiliations of the people making the arguments.

VI. One technique for doing discourse analysis is to look at the situated meanings of what seem to be “key terms” in a piece of data. Situated meanings are those words take on in actual contexts of use and interaction. Situated meanings “customize” the basic or literal meanings of words by expanding or contracting their meanings in certain ways. Thus, consider how the word “holocaust” is being used in the “Darwin” text above. What do you think the situated meaning of the word in the texts is? It seems to me that the text equates killing people because of the ethnic or racial group to which they belong (“Holocaust” in the text) to aborting embryos (“holocaust” in the text). But, then, surely we are not “killing” unborn babies because they are unborn babies or babies. So what is the real import of the word “holocaust” to the writer of the text? This question is asking you what the author means or is trying to mean. It does not matter what your stance on abortion is right now, you are supposed to try to interpret the intention of the author as best you can. Indeed, you can only really criticize a text once you have made an authentic attempt to understand it.

Below I reprint a section from a government document. The passage is stating one of the purposes of the Title 1 legislation, legislation meant to improve “the Academic

Achievement of the Disadvantaged”):

(3) [to close] the achievement gap between high- and low-performing children, especially the achievement gaps between minority and nonminority students, and between disadvantaged children and their more advantaged peers ...

What are the situated meanings of the words “minority students” and “nonminority students”? Who is being named? Not all minorities in the United States achieve less well in school than do white students, for example, some Asian groups (but not all) in fact perform better. Does the law intend to help white students catch up with these Asian groups? What is the situated meaning of the words “disadvantaged students”? Do the well-off white students who do less well than some Asian groups count here as “disadvantaged students”? If you think “disadvantaged” here means “poor”, why doesn’t the document just say “poor students” or “students living in poverty”?

An African-American colleague of mine—a well-known and well-respected academic—once said to me: “When (American) educators say a classroom is ‘diverse’, they mean it has African-American students in it; when they say it is ‘very diverse’ they mean it is all African-Americans”. This remark was meant partly in jest, but what does it capture about how the word “diversity” works in discussions about schools in the United States? If you have the necessary background knowledge, how does the word “diversity” function in the context of discussions about schools in other countries? In your view, is a classroom of all white students where some are from poor families, some are from middle-class families, and some are from very wealthy families “diverse”? Is it “culturally diverse”?

Today, we often hear terms like “computer literacy”, “digital literacy”, “cultural literacy”, “media literacy”, and others. What do you think the basic or literal meaning or meanings of the word “literacy” are? We do sometimes see the term “print literacy”? Do you think the word “literacy” does or used to have a basic or literal meaning tied to reading and writing written language? What does the word “literacy” mean in terms like “digital literacy” or “media literacy”? What are the situated meanings of the words “literacy” or “literate” in the sentences below:

- 1a. The group devotes its funds and efforts to teaching literacy to the poor in the undeveloped world.
- 1b. Highly literate people tend to accept the status quo in society because it advantages them. They have good jobs, high status, and influence.
- 1c. Many of today’s college freshman have a deplorable level of literacy.
- 1d. That was a quite literate reading of Shakespeare’s sonnet.
- 1e. A country needs a 60 percent literacy rate to develop an industrial economy.
- 1f. We need to ensure that all children gain twenty-first century literacy in our schools.
- 1g. Many young children who cannot yet read nonetheless display literate behaviors before they go to school.

What do you think the situated meanings of the word “read” are in the following sentences?

- 2a. He can read the words, but he does not know what they mean.
- 2b. He reads two newspapers every day.
- 2c. She read the signs and knew the boss was going to give her a promotion.
- 2d. I read the instructions but I did not understand them. [Said by someone who perfectly well knows what English words mean.]
- 2e. His reading of Shakespeare showed great nuance and depth.
- 2f. I cannot read violent books.
- 2g. Parents often encourage their toddlers to do pretend readings of books.

VII. Imagine what you take to be a typical classroom in school. You imagine the environment is set up in a certain way, there are various sorts of objects in the environment, people act and interact in certain ways and engage in certain sorts of activities, and they believe and value in certain ways about relevant topics. This is your “figured world” (or “cultural model”) for what you take to be a “typical” classroom. You use this model, often unconsciously, when you think and talk about classrooms unless something makes you reflect more overtly on classrooms and makes you drop aspects of your figured world and think more overtly about things.

Figured worlds are good in that they allow us not to have to think overtly about

everything all at once. We can get on with our business, leaving certain things on “auto-pilot”, so to speak. On the other hand, figured worlds can be bad in that they can stand in the way of paying attention to or accepting change. For example, people’s figured world for classrooms often stands in the way of school reform efforts that want to change schooling significantly. We have figured worlds for a great many things. They are a cultural storehouse of taken-for-granted knowledge that often guides our beliefs and behaviors. Of course, people who are members of different social and cultural groups may have quite different figured worlds for the same things and this can sometimes lead to confusion.

What is your figured world for the following things?

1. An elementary school classroom
2. A college classroom
3. Marriage
4. Video game players
5. Dating (how dates are made and carried out)
6. Poor people
7. Rich people.

As discourse analysts we often have to try to discover what sorts of figured worlds or cultural models a person was using when he or she said or wrote something. We have to figure this out based on what the person said or wrote, the context of the communication, and any information we can about and from the speaker or writer and others involved in

the communication.

The passage below was written by a very well-known conservative, Theodore Olson. Olson is arguing that conservatives, who often oppose gay marriage, should, in fact, support it, based on their core values. Use this passage to discuss how Olson is seeking to change and, at the same time keep, aspects of a traditional figured world for marriage. What does the debate over gay marriage tell you about how figured worlds can be challenged and possibly change?

Many of my fellow conservatives have an almost knee-jerk hostility toward gay marriage. This does not make sense, because same-sex unions promote the values conservatives prize. Marriage is one of the basic building blocks of our neighborhoods and our nation. At its best, it is a stable bond between two individuals who work to create a loving household and a social and economic partnership. We encourage couples to marry because the commitments they make to one another provide benefits not only to themselves but also to their families and communities. Marriage requires thinking beyond one's own needs. It transforms two individuals into a union based on shared aspirations, and in doing so establishes a formal investment in the well-being of society. The fact that individuals who happen to be gay want to share in this vital social institution is evidence that conservative ideals enjoy widespread acceptance. Conservatives should celebrate this, rather than lament it.

(<http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2010/01/08/the-conservative->

case-for-gay-marriage.html)

Consider the data below. This is from an interview with a teenage Latina. The girl lives in relative poverty in a post-industrial city with few jobs. The girl has been asked why she thinks there are so few Hispanic doctors and lawyers. What sorts of figured worlds do you think the girl is using and reasoning from? Do you think the interview question helped trigger the use of these figured worlds? Figured worlds are sorts of stereotypes, though this does not mean they have no relationship to realities. Can this data illuminate how “facts” (realities) can give rise to figured worlds that are not fully accurate and not helpful for a person? In many cases, we cannot change people’s views by denying facts we do not like (though we should certainly deny ones that are untrue), but, rather, by re-contextualizing these facts into larger and better explanatory structures. Could you do this for this girl?

...Because like white people get more education.

Like Hispanic people don’t, don’t, some of the Hispanic don’t like go to college and stuff like that.

And... you know, just, the white people just like, they like to, they want a future.

You know they—

some, some Hispanic and stuff they, they just—

I’m Hispanic but I’m saying—

some um, they just like, like to hang around, they don’t want to go to school, they don’t you know.

So white people don't, don't think like that.

They want to get an education they want to have (a good/their) life.

And they really don't care what people say,

like if they make fun of 'em.

Like "gringos" and stuff like that.

They don't, they don't care,

they just do their work and then, they see after,

they're like, they're married

and they have their professions and stuff made,

then, let's see who's gonna like, be better.

Maybe the Hispanic boy that said that you gonna, that like you're a nerd or something.

Probably in the streets looking for sh, for money and stuff like that,

Sick,

and you have a house,

you have your profession,

you got money, so...

VIII. In different contexts and in different activities we humans often use different styles of language. I have called these different styles "social languages". We talk like a lawyer, a gamer, or a gang member when we are being and doing what lawyers, gamers, and gang members (of certain sorts) are and do. Below are some sentences I randomly

generated using a set of different lists of words for each position in a given sentence frame. The words are taken from the vocabulary of the sorts of writing some sorts of “post-modern” literary and cultural scholars use:

1. The reification of pop culture gestures toward the historicization of the gendered body.
2. The eroticization of post-capitalist hegemony is homologous with the discourse of pedagogical institutions.
3. The emergence of the gaze invests itself in the fantasy of linguistic transparency.
4. The epistemology of praxis may be parsed as the engendering of the public sphere.
5. The logic of the natural carries with it the ideology of agency.
6. The emergence of pop culture invests itself in the fantasy of power/knowledge.

Why do these sentences sound like they are a particular style of English? What characterizes that style? Could that style be done in other languages? Even though I generated these sentences “randomly” from lists, do the sentences have meanings? How? Why? Does this tell you anything about the role of the speaker or writer and how intentions work in speaking and writing?

Below is another example of a distinctive style of language. Who uses such language and why?

- Average weapon damage (**A**) can be calculated by adding the high and low ends of the damage range, then dividing by two.
- Weapon DPS is calculated by taking the average damage and dividing by the weapon speed (**S**).
- Crits – Melee crits are a chance to add 100% of the weapon damage. To add damage from critical hits the average damage is multiplied by the Crit percentage (**C**).

Sometimes social languages involve set ways of people participating with and responding to each other. It is almost as if a given way of using language sets up a sort of “game” people play. How would you characterize the social language below and the form of participation it sets up? What is the purpose of this “game”?

Teacher: ...Ready? The next word is... (three second pause) right.

Please turn right.

Right. (Pause)

OK.

How do you spell right?

Everyone?

Students and teacher (many of them, in unison): R...i...g...h...t.

Teacher: Right.

You got it.

Let's sound it out, ready?

The teacher below is using language in a different way to set up a different type of practice or “game” (see Lampert, Rittenhouse, & Crumbaugh, 1996 for this data and a discussion of it). How would you characterize the way language works here and the forms of participation it sets up? What do you think the purpose of this language and the “game” it sets up are? (I have bolded and italicized some of the language to help guide your answer—if this does not help, ignore it.)

1 Ellie: Um, well, there were a whole bunch of—a whole bunch of rules you could use, use, um, divided by two—And you could do, um, minus one half.

2 Lampert: And eight minus a half is?

3 Ellie: Four [In response to this answer, audible gasps can be heard from the class, and several other students tried to enter the conversation.]

4 Lampert: You think that would be four. **What does somebody else think? I, I started raising a question because a number of people have a different idea about that. So let's hear what your different ideas are and see if you can take Ellie's position into consideration and try to let her know what your position is. Enoyat?**

5 Enoyat: Well, see, *I agree with Ellie* because you can have eight minus one half and that's the same as eight divided by two or eight minus four.

6 Lampert: Eight divided by two is four, eight minus four is four? Okay, **so Enoyat thinks he can do all of those things to eight and get four.**

Okay? Charlotte?

7 Charlotte: Um, I think eight minus one half is seven and a half because—

8 Lampert: Why?

9 Charlotte: Um, one half's a fraction and it's a half of one whole and so when you subtract you aren't even subtracting one whole number so you can't get even a smaller number that's more than one whole. *But I see what Ellie's doing*, she's taking half the number she started with and getting the answer.

10 Lampert: **So, you would say one half of eight? Is that what you mean?**

[Lampert and Charlotte alternate for three turns; then, Lampert checks in with Ellie, who again repeats her original answer; then Lampert calls on Shakroukh.]

11 Shakroukh: *I would agree with Ellie if she had added something else to her explanation, if she had said one half of the amount that you have to divide by two.*

12 Lampert: **Okay. You guys are on to something really important about fractions, which is that a fraction is a fraction of something. And we have to have some kind of agreement here if it's a fraction of eight or if it's a fraction of a whole.**