

VAN DIJK, TEUN A. (ed.). *Handbook of discourse analysis*. 4 vols. Volume 1: *Disciplines of discourse*. xvii, 302 pp., Volume 2: *Dimensions of discourse*. xvii, 279 pp., Volume 3: *Discourse and dialogue*. xix, 251 pp., Volume 4: *Discourse analysis in society*. xvii, 228 pp., London: Academic Press, 1985.

This high-monumental work marks an attempt to put 'discourse analysis' on the map as an academic discipline. The contributors, about equally American and European (but almost totally, and quite remarkably, excluding France), come mostly from theoretical linguistics, psychology, sociology, literature and computer science, with one lonely anthropologist among the minorities. So diverse a set of scholars might have been expected to produce a cacophony, or a creative confusion, but under the clear guiding hand of the editor, Professor van Dijk, it is structured – perhaps too much so – around certain central themes.

The first volume suggests how different disciplines view, and may contribute to, this new subject; while the second describes methods of discourse analysis, in which style and narrative compete as poor seconds to more traditional linguistic approaches. The third volume concentrates on dialogue, joking, rumour and verbal exchanges in a range of settings; and the last, of most potential interest to anthropologists, promises to consider the cognitive, social and cultural contexts of discourse.

So what light does the *Handbook* throw on that fashionable, but obscure, word 'discourse'? It emerges here as the grey area somewhere between syntax and society where meanings are said to happen. The contributors seem to be trying to escape the Scylla of theoretical linguistics and the Charybdis of philosophical semantics and chart a course through speech acts to 'symbolic interactionism' and 'the ethnography of speaking'. As the stress throughout is on how people actually speak in different contexts, it is singularly unfortunate that most of the papers are too short to provide any. The examples, too brief (with a few notable exceptions) to permit more than formal analysis or an airy gesture to culture or ideology, are almost exclusively confined to the West. While some essays are elegant and detailed pieces, in others the situations are artificially set up in the name of scientific rigour, sometimes with comic results. Scherer and Wallbott filmed civil servants talking to actors and treasure such ambiguous things as 'mean voice'; Atkinson mars an interesting essay on Tony Benn's oratory with graphs and 'x's of various size to signify 'applause intensity'; Fillmore tries to make sense of a San Francisco Opera company synopsis of *La Bohème*. If this is discourse, then what is all the fuss about?

The problem is that 'discourse' here means 'speech', and a determinedly positivist air hangs over the proceedings: cultural presuppositions, implicit understandings, what is unsaid, and what unsayable, is largely passed over in favour of a minute analysis of utterance, gesture and expression. There is virtually no reference to the lively debates in hermeneutics and post-structuralism (Struever being an honourable exception). If excluding those who have probably done most to elaborate the notion of discourse is odd, so equally is the absence of anthropologists, or any detailed use of ethnography, granted the lip-service paid to variations in social context. So how we are to understand language, textuality and meaning and the circumstances under which people actually use words, tends to be ignored. In spite of some valuable contributions the enterprise ends up rather like the statue of Ozymandias, with vast linguistic and methodological legs, but with no trunk or head.