NEXUS ANALYSIS

1. Nexus analysis – an action oriented approach to discourse

The primary concern of nexus analysis is the complex relations between discourse and action. All action is seen as inherently social and mediated; that is carried out by social actors through the use of mediational means. Though concerned with oral and written text, the main focus of nexus analysis is not texts in themselves, but rather the relationship between text and action. Scollon (2001a:144) points out how several research traditions, though concerned with the relationship between language and the social world, tend to overlook the crucial role of actions, which results in slanted focus in favour of texts:

many theories of language and of discourse start out with a focus on ‘social action’ such as speech act theory, pragmatics, interactional sociolinguistics, and CDA but then somehow in practice tend to become focused only on text. Other aspects of social action and other mediational means than language and discourse are backgrounded as ‘context’.

Nexus analysis does not focus primarily on language in itself, but rather how language and other semiotic and material tools are used to mediate action. The term ‘mediational means’ was introduced by Wertsch in his book *Voices of the Mind: Sociocultural Approach to Mediated Action* (1991), and mediational means, including language, are seen as shaping both
social and individual processes. Wertsch (1991:12) underlines the connectedness between the social actor and the tools used for performing an action in the following manner:

The most central claim I wish to pursue is that human action typically employees ‘mediational means’ such as tools and language, and that these mediational means shape the action in essential ways. According to this view, it is possible as well as useful, to make an analytic distinction between action and mediational means, but the relationship between action and mediational means is so fundamental that it is more appropriate, when referring to the agent involved, to speak of “individual(s)-acting-with mediational-means” that to speak simply of “individual(s)”. Thus, the answer to the question of who is carrying out the action will invariably identify the individual(s) in the concrete situation and the mediational means employed.

Several other traditions in social sciences also focus on the role of actions, for instance actor-network-theory (Latour 2005) and other approaches within the field of social studies of science and technology, in particular theorists addressing the social construction of technology (Pinch and Bijker 1986).

Departing from Wertsch’s concern with mediation, Ron and Suzie Wong Scollon have taken social action as a starting point both for the analysis and one of the major theoretical underpinnings in order to investigate social actions in a wide range of social and geographical contexts. In their book *Nexus analysis and the emerging internet* (2004), they present the methodological approach and theoretical underpinnings of nexus analysis, drawing on their experience with computer mediated communication and teaching in Alaska in the late 1970s.
and early 1980s. Shifting the focus from large scale discourses, language and text to concrete actions performed by social actors, enables the researcher to include both micro and macro perspectives, without postulating a micro-macro-dichotomy often proposed in social sciences research. While nexus analysis takes a social action as its starting point, the approach is firmly embedded within the critical tradition of social sciences and humanities.

2. Engagement with social issues

The point of departure of a nexus analysis is the identification of a social issue; thus, researchers who conduct their work within nexus analysis usually are driven by an engagement in social issues. Scollon and Scollon (2007:608) describe the deeply embedded social engagement of nexus analysis in the following manner: “Nexus analysis is our response to Hymes’ call three decades ago for each of us to reinvent anthropology as ‘a personal general anthropology, whose function is the advancement of knowledge and the welfare of mankind’.”. This statement by Scollon and Scollon situates nexus analysis firmly in the critical tradition within social sciences and humanities, combining academic research with a social and often also a political engagement (Wodak 2006). This social concern lead researchers within various fields within Applied linguistics, linguistic anthropology, sociolinguistics, pedagogics and to some extent also linguistics to actively use their research to address inequality, power and ideology in the social world and to investigate how such issues are reproduced through discourse. (Fairclough 2001, Rojo and Pujol 2011, Lane 2012). Researchers concerned with social justice and structures of power addressed both overt and
more covert power structures and how these were embedded and reified in large-scale discourses.

This critical perspective can be seen as both an inwards/internal and outwards endeavour as the field took a critical stance both towards the role of research in the social world and simultaneously towards the object of study. The critical turn affected how language, the object of study for pragmatics, discourse analysis and sociolinguistics, was seen. Within these overlapping research fields, language has always been understood as a socially embedded and contextualised phenomenon, but critical approaches started questioning the delimitation of language and discourse and also the notion of language as an object of study that could be analysed in isolation from its social context. This theoretical shift towards more critically orientated approaches was a reaction to structuralist and generativist research traditions where language was perceived as a self-contained system, but this shift also went hand-in-hand with a technological revolution. More sophisticated audio and visual recording equipment allowed for more detailed analysis of not just phonological and grammatical aspects of language, but also non-verbal and contextualised language use; hence, researchers from a wide range of disciplined turned to analysing language in use and seeing language as shaped by social and cultural factors (Lane 2012). As a result of these processes, the last decades of the 20th century also brought about a profound change in the view way language and discourse were analysed, and nexus analysis is firmly embedded in this critical tradition.

3. Theoretical inspiration
Like pragmatics, nexus analysis is a multidisciplinary enterprise. Nexus analysis draws on many different linguistic and anthropological fields: Critical Discourse Analysis, Ethnography of Communication, social psychology, interactional sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology. One of the aims of nexus analysis is to clarify the many complex relations between discourse and social action (Scollon and Scollon 2002:1). As outlined in the introduction all actions are understood to be mediated by cultural tools (or mediational means), and in this aspect we find the influence from social psychology, and the writings of Wertsch in particular. Mediational means are semiotic tools ranging from language to material objects, and social action, or mediated action, is seen as any action performed by a social actor through the use of cultural tools (Scollon and Scollon 2004).

Nexus analysis shares many of the same concerns and theoretical underpinnings with Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), but in contrast to a lot of research within the CDA framework which focuses on large scale social discourses, the starting point for a mediated discourse analysis is always on the micro level: a social action performed by a social actor. CDA has sometimes been criticised for focussing solely on power structures and large macro-level discourses. Nexus analysis shifts the focus from these large scale discourses to social actions. The starting point of a Nexus analysis is to identify a crucial social action, and then to map the cycles of the people, places, discourses, objects, and concepts which circulate through the moment when the social action takes place (Scollon and Scollon 2004:159). Thus, the focus of the analysis is not primarily on discourse, but rather language is seen as a tool used in order to accomplish actions (Norris 2002:97). Though taking action as the starting point of the analysis, nexus analysis takes a firm interest in discourse, because discourse is intrinsically linked to social issues. The difference between CDA and nexus analysis is a matter of focus: CDA focusses on discourses of social issues whereas the primary object of study of nexus
analysis is social action through which social actors produce the histories and habitus of their daily lives which is the ground in which society is produced and reproduced (Scollon 2001a:140).

Nexus analysis focusses on the three concepts Wodak (2006) describes as indispensable for CDA: the concept of power, the concept of history, and the concept of ideology (belief systems put forward by a group in power). CDA sees social processes as dynamic and discourse as historically produced and interpreted; hence, CDA emphasises both diachronic and synchronic aspects. In a similar vein, nexus analysis underscores that discourses, social actors and mediational means have a history and that these therefore cannot be analysed without reference to the past. Thus, the historical perspective is crucial: people, objects, mediational means and discourses are seen as having a history and projecting a future. Though the analysis starts with single events, a main concern of nexus analysis is to address issues such as how social realities are constituted across time and spaces (de Saint Georges 2005:155). Time sediments social actions and transforms them into social practices. When a social action which is taken repeatedly and recognised by other social actors as the same social action, this is seen as a social practice (Scollon and Scollon 2004). Drawing on Bourdieu (1977), Jones and Norris (2005:9) define a practice as “a social action with a history”. Thus, social practices arise, develop and get established over time through interaction. Social actions are analysed as real-time, face-to-face social interaction, and hence, nexus analysis draws on work within interactional sociolinguistics, as pointed out by Scollon and Scollon (2003: 174):

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.

Nexus analysis draws on the works of Goffman (1963) who underlined the importance of analysing how social actors behave when in the presence of others and therefore takes a broad view on interaction as encompassing not only talk, but also physical positioning, movement, objects etc.

As mentioned above, another source of theoretical and methodological inspiration of nexus analysis is the ethnography of communication and linguistic anthropology. Nexus analysis is a form of ethnography, and the researcher’s goal is to enter the nexus of practice (see Section 6) and thereby identify crucial social practices and social actions that are relevant not only to the researcher, but primarily to the participants in the nexus of practice.

Nexus analysis involves participation and systematic observation, which are two key aspects of ethnography (Hymes 1996), but nexus analysis also departs from traditional ethnographic analysis because both the starting point and the theoretical and methodological focal point of the study is social action and not any “a priori social group, class, tribe, or culture” (Scollon and Scollon 2004:13). When doing a nexus analysis, the goal is to find a place in the nexus of practice so that the researcher can interact with the participants in the nexus of practice in order to identify the social actions to be studied.
4 Nexus of practice

Social practices, both discursive and non-discursive, get linked up over time to form a nexus of practice. Scollon and Scollon (2004:159) give the following definition of ‘nexus of practice’:

A nexus of practice is the point at which the 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.

The notion of nexus of practice resembles community of practice, though the focus is on different dimensions. The term community of practice was first used by Lave and Wenger (1991) as a way of explaining how learning is grounded in social interaction. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992), arguing that social practice and individual "place" in the community interconnect and that sociolinguistics therefore needed a term that would encompassed both aspects, provide this definition of community of practice (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992:464):

An aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in an endeavor. Ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values, power relations – in short, practices – emerge in the course of this mutual endeavor. As a social construct, a CoP
is different from the traditional community, primarily because it is defined simultaneously by its membership and by the practice in which that membership engages.

The notion of community of practice encompasses the concept of membership which develops through interaction because of a mutual engagement in an endeavour, that is the community of practice is goal-orientated and created, maintained and developed through social interaction. Scollon (2001a, 2001b) finds that the term Community of practice presupposes a bounded social entity and a notion of membership and therefore also an idea of inclusion and exclusion. According to Scollon, shared practices do not imply community membership, and therefore the term nexus of practice is preferred.

A nexus of practice is the intersection of multiple practices (or mediated actions) that are recognisable to a group of social actors. In contrast to the notion of ‘nexus of practice’, the terms community of practice and speech community presuppose a community and some criteria of membership. Though sharing a focus on social interaction, for a nexus of practice, group membership is not an essential factor. The theoretical focal point of a nexus analysis is not a group or community, but the study of social actions, and this is also what makes nexus analysis different from traditional studies within the field of Ethnography of Communication.

For instance, the social action of buying coffee at a coffee shop does not require membership of any predefined group. Though social actions in most or all coffee shops are similar (ordering, paying and receiving/picking up one’s coffee), there might also be differences. When visiting a coffee shop in another country, the lower-level social actions might differ from what one is used to, and therefore one may pay more careful attention to the
practices of ordering coffee: size of coffee, for here or to go, and whether the coffee is picked up at the till or at another part of the counter. After a few visits to coffee shops, one gets to know how to place the order, where to pick up the coffee etc. and does pay explicit attention to these actions anymore: they have become internalised as practice.

5. **Nexus analysis a form of historical and ethnographic discourse analysis**

Social action occurs at moment in time and is linked to the histories and identities of the social actors, social interaction and discourses. Therefore, nexus analysis situates social action at the intersection of three key factors: the historical bodies of the participants in that action, the interaction order (mutually produced amongst the participants) and discourses in place which enable the action and/or are used by participants as mediational means (Scollon and Scollon 2004:153). This is illustrated in Figure 1 (based on Scollon and Scollon 2004:154):

![Nexus analysis](image)

*Figure 1 Nexus analysis (Scollon and Scollon 2004:154)*
The concepts of interaction order and discourse will be familiar to the field of pragmatics. Nexus analysis’ understanding of the interaction order is in line with Goffman’s term, observing that individuals behave differently when they are with others adhering to conventionalised norms (Goffman 1963, Sarangi 1996). A wide range of discourses circulate through the moment in time and space when a social action takes place, but not all of these discourses in place are directly relevant to the social actions we analyse. The task of a nexus analysis is to identify the relevant or foregrounded discourses and therefore should be studied empirically, but the researcher may be faced with the challenge of ‘invisible’ discourses – discourses that are so deeply immersed in practice that participants in the nexus of practice do not refer to them. Such discourses tend to be visible only by mapping discourse cycles backward or forward away from the moment when the action occurs; hence, the historical perspective of nexus analysis is important. Scollon (2008) suggest replacing the notion of ‘cycle of discourse’ with ‘discourse itinerary’ because discourse analysis inherently operates along itineraries of transformation (Scollon 2008:233).

According to Scollon and Scollon (2001:538), the term ‘discourse analysis’ is polysemic: “On the one hand, it refers to the close linguistic study, from different perspectives, of texts in use. On the other hand, discourse refers to socially shared habits of thought, perception, and behaviour reflected in numerous texts belonging to different genres”. The first sense has its roots in linguistics, pragmatics, French structuralism, ethnography of communication and variation analysis whereas discourse analysis in the second sense also emerged from critical studies. Discourse in this broad sense is often referred to as Discourse with a capital D (Gee, 1999, Scollon and Scollon 2001) in contrast to the term discourse which refers to how language is used ‘on site’. Scollon and Scollon (2004) show how discourses through habit and socialisation can become internalised as practice to the extent that they become part of our
historical bodies. Our bodies can be seen as lifetime accumulations of our actions, memories, and experiences, or what Scollon and Scollon (2004:13) call the historical body:

Different people play the same role differently depending on their history of personal experience inscribed in what the philosopher Nishida calls the historical body. A lifetime of personal habits comes to feel so natural that one’s body carries out action seemingly without being told. Bourdieu referred to this phenomenon as habitus but we prefer historical body because it situates bodily memories more precisely in the individual body.

As we see, the term historical body encompasses both the notion of embodiment and time, concepts that have been brought to the forefront of ethnographic research (Blommaert 2010): the object of study – social action and practice – is situated in real time, but it is produced by historical processes.

6 Activities of nexus analysis: Engaging the Nexus of Practice, Navigating the Nexus of Practice and Changing the Nexus of Practice

As outlined above, the point of departure of a nexus analysis is the identification of a social issue, and the primary object of analysis is a social or mediated action or the point in time and
space where a particular social issue is manifested in action. Scollon and Scollon (2004) define three activities of a nexus analysis: Engaging the nexus of practice, navigating the nexus of practice, and changing the nexus of practice.

Nexus analytic research tends to address social issues, and some examples are literary classroom practices in indigenous multilingual settings (Scollon and Scollon 2004, Pietikäinen and Pitkänen-Huhta 2013, language shift (Lane 2009), youth unemployment (de Saint Georges 2005), dominance of majority languages (Hult 2013), and disability (Al Zidjaly 2006).

Nexus analysis draws on methodological tools from a range of related approaches. Scollon and Scollon (2003) present three main activities of a nexus analysis: engaging, navigating and changing the nexus of practice. Though these activities are outlined separately in the next section they are not strictly delimited linear activities. The three activities of a nexus analysis are illustrated in Figure 2 which highlights the interconnectedness and interplay between these activities.

![Figure 2](image)

**Figure 2** Activities of nexus analysis (from Scollon and Scollon 2004:153)
6.1 Engaging the nexus of practice

Engaging the nexus of practice is the initial activity of any ethnographic fieldwork and involves identifying a social issue, finding the primary social actors, observing the interaction order and determining the most significant cycles of discourse or discourse itineraries (Scollon 2008). In order to achieve this, it is essential for the researcher to become involved with the participants of the nexus of practice so that she may identify the social actions, discourses and cultural tools (mediational means) that are relevant to the participants. Scollon and Scollon (2004) refer to this as establishing a ‘zone of identification’, and this is the initial stage of any ethnographic fieldwork (cf. Agar 1996). Thus, the first task of a nexus analysis is to determine what kinds of data should be gathered and how to gather it. The gathering and the analysis of data are not discrete processes: the researcher analyses (parts of) the data during the process of gathering data, which in turn makes her see what other kinds of data might be useful.

The initial part of a nexus analysis is to identify some of the relevant social actions and then map the cycles of people, places, discourses, objects and concepts circulating through the moment when the relevant social action(s) occur and. In order to achieve this, the researcher must be recognised by the other participants as part of the nexus of practice. This initial step lays the groundwork for the main part of the nexus analysis: navigating the nexus of practice which is when the bulk of data gathering and analysis takes place. Through the engagement in the nexus of practice, the researcher has identified and selected relevant social issues which
will be the focus of the analysis, and now the task is to map the relevant cycles circulating through the moment when the social action takes place (Scollon and Scollon 2004:159).

6.2 Navigating the Nexus of Practice

The main activity of a nexus analysis is to map the cycles of people, places, discourses, objects and concepts circulating through the moment when a social action takes place (Scollon 2004:159). Scollon and Scollon (2004:160) describe the relation between the social action and the semiotic cycles in the following way:

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 the moment and a future that leads away from it in arcs of semiotic cycles of change and transformation.

This activity involves the gathering of data and analysis of selected data. Throughout these two initial activities of the analysis the researcher guided by interaction with participants will narrow down the scope of the analysis and select practices, discourses, social actions or sequence of actions to be analysed in more detail.

Doing a nexus analysis is more than doing research on a group of people or a community of practice; it is also doing research with people. Scollon and Scollon (2004:153) draw our
attention to this point when they write that there is no study from afar in nexus analysis (or in any ethnographic oriented research):

It is important in 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 has to be recognized by other participants as a participant of the nexus of practice under analysis.

This does not necessarily entail that the researcher gets accepted as an in-group member, but rather that the researcher develops a role for herself in order to participate. If the researcher does not participate in the nexus of practice, a full study of the nexus of practice will not be possible. The aim of this initial stage is to establish a zone of identification and become a participant of the nexus of practice so that research activities merge with participation activities (Scollon and Scollon 2004:156). Participant observation involves analysis both from within as the researcher tries to understand what is going on from the perspective of the group members and simultaneously performing an analysis from the perspective of an outsider. In this respect, nexus analysis is situated within the critical traditions emerging at the turn of the 20th century, seeing the object of study as co-constructed by the researcher and the participants in the nexus of practice. Agar (1996:4) discusses how the focus of modern critical anthropology has shifted from a study of a delimited group as an objectified entity, to seeing social group as less neatly bounded and recognising the presence of the ethnographer: “Where was the ethnographer? Wasn’t he or she a part of the story as well? Data didn’t just fall out of the sky. It was actively constructed over time in a collaborative way”. For hands-on-tasks of
data gathering and analysis, nexus analysis draws on many different traditions, including linguistic anthropology, interactional sociolinguistics, critical discourse analysis, multimodal discourse analysis and in particular ethnography.

The presence of a researcher has been frequently discussed and to some extent cast as a methodological problem for sociolinguistics when asking how we can observe the unobserved? Within nexus analysis, as in most critical approaches, the presence of the fieldworker is not seen as a problem, but rather as an asset when it comes to identifying relevant social actions, practices, discourses and mediational means.

Researchers and research teams working within a nexus analytical framework draw on methods from discourse analysis, linguistic anthropology, narrative approaches, literacy studies, educational studies, social semiotics etc. As mediational means encompasses both semiotic and material tools, many researchers applying nexus analysis tend to combine different types of data with a focus on different modes as they underscore that our semiotic system consists of a range of mediational means, of which language is one of the cultural tools social actors have at their disposal. Departing from Scollon and Scollon’s work on mediated discourse analysis and social semiotics, Sigrid Norris has published on multimodal interactional analysis, an approach that shares nexus analysis’ view of human action as contextualized and culturally embedded (see for instance Norris 2004).

Nexus analysis has been applied fruitfully on linguistic landscape studies, see for instance Hult 2013 and Pietikäinen, Lane, Salo and Laihiala-Kankainen 2011. Drawing on Norris’ concept of frozen actions Norris and Jones 2005), Pietikäinen et al. 2011 analysed signs in the linguistic landscapes as material results of actions performed in the past. Applications of nexus analysis on linguistic landscapes combine multimodal and linguistic approaches as well as drawing on data from different types of modes.
6.3 Changing the Nexus of Practice

It is generally recognised that the presence of the researcher influences the way people behave and this therefore has an impact on our data, though this is not always made part of the actual analysis. Nexus Analysis does not make any attempt to abstract away from the researcher’s presence. On the contrary, the researcher has to get involved with the people she is working with in order to identify the social actions, discourses, and mediational means that are relevant to the participants. Through this process of establishing a zone of identification, the researcher becomes, at least to some extent, a part of the nexus of practice and thereby also one of the influencing factors. Thus, the researcher often finds herself in a position of potential influence (Cameron et al. 1997) and it is therefore important to be aware that the position of analyst is not a neutral one. The researcher brings about change by her participation and/or by bringing the analysis back to people she worked with (Scollon 2003, Scollon and Scollon 2004). As in most research within the field of Critical Discourse Analysis, there is also an activist element in Nexus Analysis because the starting point of the analysis is a social issue and in that its goal is not only to observe and describe, but also change the nexus of practice. However, Scollon and Scollon (2004:178) stress that the analyst is not in a privileged position to bring about social change:

What you have to contribute as an ethnographer or nexus analyst is the time and skills to open up and make visible links and connections among the many trajectories of historical bodies, discourses in place, and interaction order which constitute our social
life. By your actions of analysis you are altering these trajectories for yourself and for the others in the nexus of practice and that in itself is producing social change. What these changes are will always remain to be seen as the nexus of practice is transformed over the time of the nexus analysis.

As the starting point of a nexus analysis is a social issue, the engagement of the nexus analyst will influence and change practice and alter the nexus of practice, but this engagement will also change the researcher and may have an impact on the choice of research questions, methods and theoretical insights because being part of the analysis also influences the historical body of the researcher. Hence, the change brought about by a nexus analysis should not be determined in advance, but develop as an outcome of the researcher’s engagement with a nexus of practice.

7. Conclusion

By seeing social action as a key unit of investigation nexus analysis shares one of the basic tenets of pragmatics. Austin (1962) and Searle (1969) analysed how utterances or speech acts can bring about changes in the social world. Nexus analysis highlights how social actors can do things, not only with words, but also with other semiotic and material means. By this dual focus on social action and the uses of semiotic modes there is a striking shared interest with pragmatics (Verschueren 2012), as underscored by Scollon and Scollon (2009:178) when they
write about the “shift in focus from the structures of modes to their use as pragmatic resources in human action in the world”. There is also a shared view of context as context both in nexus analytic and pragmatic approaches is not seen solely as something which can help us understand ‘the real object of study’ better; rather context, discourse and action are interwoven on multiple levels. Both context and use of language (or other semiotic means) therefore become essential parts of our object of study.

References


