
The little stuff of everyday talk has a big effect on how we present ourselves, how we want to be viewed by others, and how we see others. The complexity of the relationship between our daily conversations and the formation of identity is the subject of Karen Tracy’s Everyday Talk: Building and Reflecting Identities. The author’s goals are to demonstrate how our daily, mundane conversations are ordered by an intricate system of rules that act as the bricks and mortar that build individual identity. Tracy’s chosen methodology is discourse analysis and she argues that any study of our daily communication must be viewed through two different but complementary perspectives: the rhetorical perspective and the cultural perspective. The former assumes that an individual makes strategic choices to achieve specific conversational goals, while the latter argues that those choices are influenced by imbedded cultural practices and patterns that govern how we see ourselves and others. Along with presenting the case for the relationship between everyday talk and identity formation, Tracy hopes that her book will “move the findings of discourse analysis—a rich, interesting, and too often overlooked area of study—into the mainstream of communication coursework” (p. viii). To fulfill this aim, she has designed her work as a textbook for university students (undergraduate and graduate) who may be encountering communications for the first time, and she has compiled a rich collection of scholarly examples of research conducted using discourse analysis. Tracy has presented a strong case for the need to study everyday talk to garner a better understanding of how we see ourselves and others. Yet, despite this, her chosen perspectives, particularly the cultural perspective, present difficulties which are hard to surmount in accepting her argument.

The book is well organized and structured, presenting its argument in four sections. The first section defines the central concepts and terms of the work, specifically everyday talk, identity, and discourse analysis and provides greater explanations of the rhetorical and cultural perspectives that she applies to her analysis of everyday talk. The second section introduces some of the component parts of talk that are often analyzed through discourse analysis, for example speech acts, language, and the sound of talk. Here Tracy introduces many concepts and processes that are fundamental to discourse analysis while assessing the different parts of speech through her two perspectives. The third section addresses more complex discursive practices such as narratives and direct or indirect styles. Here again Tracy reviews different examples through the rhetorical and cultural perspectives. The final section of the book is where she reinforces her overarching aims: “By providing my readers with a vocabulary to help them notice and analyze ordinary interaction, I have sought to make a more thoughtful kind of reflection possible. Little stuff often has big effects” (p. 188).

Tracy presents a very comprehensive model of discourse analysis to her reader, relying less on the traditional theoretical and philosophical underpinnings of this method and instead presenting extensive examples of how to analyze conversations. Everyday talk is a complex subject matter, as it is very fluid and it is not always clear what a speaker’s intentions or goals are, which is why Tracy uses two perspectives in her framing of the relationship between identity and everyday talk. She relies primarily on the rhetorical perspective in her analysis of both the components of everyday talk and the more complex discursive practices. Although the approach is a very good one, in that it fits well with the rules of discourse analysis, there is some difficulty when it is applied to everyday talk. This is such a fluid and individual mode of communicating that it is difficult to accept that those observing the conversation can really have full knowledge of the strategic choices and goals of the participants.
The difficulty of determining the intentions of the conversational partners is perhaps why Tracy also chooses to study everyday talk through a cultural perspective. This approach functions well with the general concept of identity. When combined with the rhetorical perspective, it provides the scholar with a suitable cadre of existing influences and assumptions which inform the decisions that an individual makes in everyday talk. It also assists in explaining why certain individuals would follow certain rules of talk and ignore others, assuming that certain practices are culturally specific. Yet, basing the analysis of everyday talk, a very individual means of communicating, on broader cultural stereotypes is risky as there are many hidden assumptions buried within those stereotypes. Although the cultural perspective appears to fill in the blanks where the rhetorical perspective may be lacking, it too is problematic, particularly when coupled with the view of identity that Tracy proposes.

In her first chapter, Tracy details a series of different types of identity, recognizing that there are both stable and fluid features of the concept. She lists a number of categories of identity, for example, master identities, such as race or gender; interactional identities, such as friend or employee; personal identities, which deal with individual attitudes, personality or character; and finally relational identities, referring to the specific relationship between two or more people in a conversational relationship (pp. 17-20). In her description of these types of identity she does acknowledge the relationships between the general categories, yet when she applies her cultural perspective to talk she does not seem to address the cultural hybridity that would naturally influence each individual’s choices in following conversational rules. Her examples tend to prioritize one cultural influence over the other without recognizing that the blending of different cultural influences may inform choices very differently. One’s race, gender, age, and class are mutually-influential in an individual’s identity formation and the way in which they are prioritized is individual, and very difficult to measure by general assumptions. As a result, the analysis of everyday talk through this perspective leads the reader to rely on external assumptions of how different cultural groups make discursive choices. I doubt this was her intent, but the presentation of the case in this manner takes away from her more central argument, that everyday talk has a strong influence on identity formation.

As a textbook on the methods of discourse analysis, Everyday Talk: Building and Reflecting Identities is a good resource. Tracy provides a comprehensive example of how to perform discourse analysis and introduces the first time communication student to many of the terms and concepts involved in this approach. She has also succeeded in highlighting how the “little stuff” of everyday talk is very important in understanding how our ideas of ourselves, of others, and how we wish to be perceived are cultivated and open to change. Where there is a need for further study is in the recognition of the complexity of cultural hybridity when assessing the choices made by individuals in everyday talk. There needs to be a greater recognition of the complexities of the blending of cultural influences in an individual’s life and how these influences inform the choices made in daily conversation.

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