Lexical Discourse Analysis: 
Toward a Revival Using a Semantic Approach

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Abstract
This paper takes stock of discourse analysis studies favoring lexical input by revisiting the Lexical Discourse Analysis (LDA) project (Analyse du Discours à Entrée Lexicale – ADEL) as defined by Marcellesi (1976). In an attempt to familiarize ourselves with the history of discourse analysis (Mazière 2005; Paveau and Rosier 2005), we first recount the development of studies that adopt the lexical input approach, from sociolinguistic lexicology through to studies incorporating interdiscourse. We then return to what for us characterizes LDA and what was first uncovered by Dubois (1969), namely the connection between lexicon and utterance. By highlighting the limitations of vocabulary studies in the study of texts and by introducing the utterance alongside the word, Dubois opened up a channel in discourse analysis that is specific to it and that distinguishes it from other approaches such as history, sociology, and more recently, the information and communication sciences. This approach illustrates one of the postulates of discourse analysis, namely that there is a link between meaning and syntax. Thus in seeking to connect the lexicon with other discursive dimensions, the paradoxical principle on which
word-based research depends posits that words are superseded as a result of their interdependence with the syntagmatic chain and the discourse. This principle, which is at the root of LDA, is the one we seek to model from a semantic perspective. We defend the notion that recent advances in semantics – such as the praxeological approach and the semantics of constructions – can give an account of how meaning connects to discourse, and we illustrate this proposition through two case studies.

The lexicon has always proved a fruitful angle from which to approach discourse analysis. This is most probably due to the fact that it is a linguistic dimension that maintains an essential – albeit indirect – link with reality since, to borrow Caussat’s (1998, 182) apt wording, language and the world are “inseparably distinct.” However, it may also be due to the semiotic nature of the word, which offers the potentiality to gather together discourses that have already taken place (as in Bakthin’s dialogism, see Bakhtine 1929). However, the body of knowledge surrounding early discourse analysis did not favor a lexical direction. While semantic theories proved to be methodologically operational with corpora, the results did not lead to any theoretical developments. The reason in our view is that no connection was made between, on the one hand, the notion of meaning implemented by semantic theories and on the other, the notions of discourse and the relationship between language and reality represented by discourse analysis. Thus in this paper we defend the hypothesis that recent advances in semantics are suitable for discursive interpretations. We review discourse analysis studies that have favored analysis at the lexical level, revisiting Lexical Discourse Analysis (LDA) (Analyse du discours à entrée lexicale – ADEL) as defined by Marcellesi (1976). The two questions guiding our review are: How do we gain entry to discourse through words, and what type of semantics is suitable for LDA?


The studies by Pêcheux (incorporating philosophy, history, and linguistics), Foucault (history of ideas), and Dubois (lexicology) were instrumental in establishing discourse analysis as a new discipline. In fact, Dubois opened up the field of lexical studies on discourse by moving toward a notion of a lexicon connected with the utterance.

1.1. Dubois’s Lexicology (1960s)

In his doctoral thesis (1962), Dubois listed the lexical uses that reflected the economic, social, and political relationships across the different social
classes during the time of the Paris Commune (a two-month period in 1871, regarded as a seminal event in socialist history, during which a revolutionary government was in power). His aim was to present lexical systems and their evolutions by relating them to the speakers and social groups that organized them into microsystems with varying levels of stability. His work overturned the traditional frameworks of lexicology by introducing language use and variation, syntactic construction, and the level of the morpheme. Even at that stage, there was evidence of a broadening of the field to include the context of the verbal act and the syntagmatic chain (in this case, collocations).

Although Dubois laid claim to a “structural” lexicology (1962, 9), it appeared more sociolinguistic and syntagmatic in nature and thus sowed the seeds for the connection he was later to make (1969) between lexicon and utterance.

1.2. LDA and the Semantic Utterance (1970s)

During this period, Dubois’s approach was no longer centered on the lexis but on the semantics of the utterance in terms of proposition and discourse. From the working assumption that the proposition was the basic unit of discourse, Dubois suggested that the phrase should be considered the fundamental starting point for analysis. The link between proposition and phrase can be made through a liberal association of the distributional analysis\(^1\) applied to the text by Zellig S. Harris (1952/1969), combined with the syntactic transformations that reduce the utterance to the level of the nucleus of sentence and phrase and the influence of generative grammar. These principles are illustrated in the studies by Malididier (1969) of the vocabulary of the Algerian war and by Marcellesi (1976) of the vocabulary used by political parties during party conferences.

In his 1976 paper, Marcellesi\(^2\) proposed the new domain of LDA, which encompassed distributional and propositional analysis based on units of vocabulary (or keywords) assembled into groups of contextual equivalence. Importantly, Marcellesi explicitly excluded semantics. Positioning himself within standard theory as an extension of generative grammar, his focus was on syntax, and he only introduced semantics to help interpret the relations that emerge from LDA. Marcellesi sought to

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1. Borrowing from transformational grammar, Zellig Harris developed what he called “discourse analysis.” This made the coherence of a text explicit by analyzing it into classes of equivalent semantic utterances.
2. The sociolinguist Marcellesi was one of the first linguists to test out discourse analysis (Guilhaumou et al. 1994, 80).
uncover similar contexts shared by certain words in order to infer discursive and socio-historical positionings from them.

From the very earliest days, discourse analysis quickly adopted an approach whereby texts were initially analyzed by considering not the word itself but the word within an utterance produced in homogenous conditions in terms of speaker and institution. This method of analyzing utterances based on entry words was subsequently criticized. Because the transformational operations homogenized utterances, only the analyst's knowledge (whether historical or social) was ultimately revealed, the very same knowledge that had steered the selection of the entry words in the first place. It was the heterogeneity of discourses that breathed new life, theoretically and empirically, into discourse analysis.

1.3. Discursive Semantics (1970s and 1980s)
Two seminal works in the field of discourse analysis were published around the beginning of this period: Foucault’s *L’archéologie du savoir* (1969), and Pêcheux’s *Les vérités de la Palice* (1975). Even if the possibility of a discourse analysis at the lexical level was conceivable, it met with a counterproposal based on interdiscursivity.

The notion of the subject controlling the effects of meaning was rejected by Pêcheux, who instead placed semantics at the heart of his project. This allowed him to integrate history, ideologies, and the subject.

Pêcheux’s project, called “discursive semantics” or “discourse theory,” relied on a theoretical and methodological willingness to avoid unrestrained appeal to meaning in the analysis of linguistic data, which is at the root of his preference for marked formal constructs. Haroche et al. (1971) challenged traditional descriptions of meaning, arguing that they were based on the idea that all linguistic disciplines (phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics) could be formed on the basis of common structural principles. While the first three disciplines may well be theoretically isomorphic, it is not possible to define meaning within the structuralist framework because it is exposed to history and society. Pêcheur's semantics are discursive and enunciative, and “words can change their meaning depending on the positions held by those using them” (Haroche et al. 1971, 97). Discursive semantics thus describe “a discursive formation as well as the conditions for transition from one formation to another” (Haroche et al. 1971, 103). This conversion operation is at the center of Maingueneau’s global semantics, which voiced a fundamental

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3. The expression “discursive semantics” should be understood as the meaning of the discourse as opposed to the meaning of lexical units within the discourse.
criticism with regard to analyses that used entry words to gain access to discourses, claiming that these would only reach a limited aspect of the functioning of a discourse.4

Adopting Foucault’s (1969) propositions on discursive formations and adapting the units and methods of structural semantics to discourse (but, again, without the theory), Maingueneau (1983) laid down the principles of a discourse semantics free from philology, structural lexicology, and Harris’s distributionalism. Instead, he put forward a global semantics by comparing and contrasting two discourses (the Jansenist and devout Humanist discourses of the seventeenth century). According to Maingueneau, this consists of a system of semantic constraints that guarantees that the utterances produced conform to a type of discourse and that one discourse will convert into another.

The semantics proposed by Maingueneau was global since its constraints were applied at the various levels of vocabulary, themes, intertextuality, and occurrences of enunciation. While some of the input was lexical, this was always linked to this global system. Maingueneau attached great importance to the listing of the word within a complex network of relations and recommended therefore that it be “integrated with syntax and the utterance within the framework of a discourse theory that encompasses a global functioning” (1976, 64).

1.4. The Word and Different Levels of Discursivity (from 1990 onward)

The 1990s saw a revival of interest in the analysis of discourse at the lexical level (Branca 1998). These very diverse studies, which put the word at the heart of discursive matters, differed from early LDA in that they integrated different levels of discursivity (syntax, utterance, enunciation, and text) with the lexicon. The question of meaning (including discourse semantics and the meaning of the word in the discourse) reappeared as an analytical issue but without truly giving rise to a semantic theory that would be integrated in a notion of discourse.5

Using political lexicometry researchers Using statistical linguistics, corpus linguists (Salem 1993, Tournier 1996) took the word as their preferred quantitative and control unit for identifying discourses and their developments. Like Haroche et al. (1971), they invested in the enunciative hypothesis mentioned above. The word was considered a

4. However, Maingueneau would later moderate this condemnation of entry words; see Maingueneau 1991, 83-4).
5. Since we do not have space here to present all of these studies here, the selection we made may appear somewhat arbitrary.
graphic invariant related to the system of oppositions that emerge from the texts being studied. The question of meaning was not eliminated but intervened either in the word’s “use value” in the discourse, in the discursive function of the repetition of a word (or group of words), or in an associative meaning discernible in recurrences or co-occurrences. Constructed and conveyed by discourse, this associative meaning was appropriate to an ideology and was stored in the memories of those to whom the discourse was addressed. The analysis of meaning therefore shifted toward the analysis of ideologies.

A second approach, which consolidated the idea of a language-discourse interaction and the existence of a lexical meaning in language, analyzed the word from a paradigmatic perspective inspired by lexicology but adapted to texts (Petiot and Reboul-Touré 2006; Cusin-Berche 1998). This approach was concerned with organizing the lexicon in discourse (in the tradition of Mortureux’s work (1993)) and with making use of the notion of the referential paradigm. Mortureux used the study of semantic relations between terms, the morphological analysis of terms associated with entry words and the discursive role of signifiers. Discourse was thus essentially considered in a limited intradiscursive capacity. Finally, one of the preferred objectives in this approach was to reconstruct the system by organizing the vocabulary in the discourse in order to compare it with the system of linguistic signs. In this second group of studies, discourse was therefore conceived as either the realization or the rearrangement of the system of language.

A final and particularly well-represented analytical trend running through many studies was the enunciative approach. A non-exhaustive list of names include Moirand (2007), Fiala and Ebel (1983), Krieg-Planque (2009), and Siblot (1993). These researchers studied the way in which discourse and its operations (circulation, metalinguistic and discursive commentaries, dialogism) are directly involved in the discursive construction of social events. They shared the fact that on the one hand, they established discourses in public spaces – and more specifically the discourse of the press – as their field of study, and that on the other, they took the word as an observable circulating unit. The questions of lexical meaning and of use value of the word in discourse seemed least relevant and were set aside in favor of a contextual and enunciative meaning. The word thus took on meaning or lost its original meaning from one utterance to the next, circulating in spaces (such as the discourses of the press) across porous thresholds and heterogenous discursive formations.

In brief, by introducing the utterance alongside of the word, Dubois opened up a channel in discourse analysis that was specific to it and that
distinguished it from other approaches (such as history, sociology, and the information and communication sciences). His work illustrated one of the assumptions of discourse analysis, namely that there is a link between meaning and syntax. In seeking to connect the lexicon with other discursive dimensions, the paradoxical principle on which word-based research depends is therefore such that words are superseded as a result of their interdependence with the syntagmatic chain and the discourse. This principle, which is at the root of LDA, is the one we seek to model here from a semantic perspective through case studies of the words “crisis” and “insecurity.”

2. The Case of “Crisis”
In a study of the construction in and through the discourse of two events of the conflict type, namely the war in Afghanistan (2001) and the conflict involving casual workers in the performing arts (2003-4) reported in Le Monde and Le Figaro (Veniard 2007, 2013), the word “crisis” (crise) appeared as a central designation on account of its frequency and of the place it held in the media discourse. Examples of designations of the events included “the Afghan crisis” and “the casual workers crisis.” In this paper, we examine the role of this term in the configuration of the social meaning of the two events. By “social meaning” (Moirand 2007), we mean the discursive, linguistic, symbolic, and memory resources as well as the beliefs mobilized by a group to interpret the event in question and to reduce the disruption it caused to the normal order of things. A tailored semantic description thus allows for an explanation of the discursive functioning of the word. This analysis will illustrate a possible connection between the word, the utterance, and the discourse.

2.1. Recent Developments in Semantics
An initial attempt to describe the name of the abstract entity, namely the “crisis,” came up against limitations inherent in the referential approaches of meaning. It considered meaning to be made up of a series of essential and satisfactory conditions a referent must meet in order for it to be named in a certain way. We therefore take up an alternative notion of meaning, integrating an experiential dimension (the indexical semantics of Cadiot & Nemo 1997) or a praxeological dimension (the praxematics of Siblot 1997). Neither of these two approaches share the same representation of meaning (a very general, abstract, indexical principle indicating the access route to the object vs. a componential representation). Nor do they share their place of observation (namely the language or constructed utterances vs. the
discourse, in both its intra- and interdiscursive dimensions). However, they do share the assumption that meaning fully incorporates human experience and practices. Indexical semantics assumes that where language is concerned, it is not the case that “in the beginning, there was a world without man and then there was a world with man” (Cadiot and Nemo 1997, 144) but rather that “words unreservedly accept this world including man” (Cadiot and Nemo 1997, 144). However, in terms of praxematics, the practices are more varied and range from the manipulative to the technical, social, and more abstract (Siblot 1997).

At the theoretical and methodological level, we draw inspiration from the concept of micro-discourse introduced by Constantin de Chanay and Rémi-Giraud (2003). These authors suggest that we conceptualize the meaning of a word as the result of a process of sedimentation in the language of contextual regularities found, according to these two authors, in dictionaries. Micro-discourse condenses the discourse in which the word appears, making the pragmatic semes stand out since these are more important than the referential features in the signification. In our case, lexicographic discourse will be understood as a discourse set up as a reference point for meaning combined with media and literary discourse (Veniard 2013).

2.2. Analysis of “crisis:” From the Pragmatic to the Social Meaning of an Event
Lexicographical discourse analysis exposes a series of semes with shared senses of the word segmented by referential domain (medical, economic, political, etc.): [+period], [+intensity], and [+breakdown]. The statistical and co-textual verbal analyses serve to verify the realizations of these semes while also supplementing them by highlighting the recurrence of a group of forms around the target word. These forms are the verbs “resolve” (résoudre), “come out” (sortir), and “manage” (gérer) and their associated nominalizations, namely “resolution” (solution), “management” (gestion), and “exit” (sortie). The discursive synonymy of these rests on the idea of ending a process by bringing it under control. Complementary data on a corpus of literary texts available on Frantext (an online resource) confirms this relation of co-occurrence.

6. Intradiscourse refers to the thread of discourse in its linear development (cohesion, coherence) whereas interdiscourse refers to discourses that have already taken place and become part of the intradiscourse.
7. FRANTEXT is a three million word text database (12th – 21st century), ATILF-CNRS, http://www.frantext.fr/.
The data show that the meaning of the noun “crisis” within the context of events cited above contains a pragmatic component that we suggest marking as [+that one must resolve] (qu’on doit résoudre). This relative clause highlights the expression of a relationship with the object under a predicative form, which reveals the argument structure of the noun (A1 resolves O1, where A1 = the actant and O1 = “crisis”). The indefinite subject in the clause restores a characteristic feature of the discursive behavior of the word, namely the anonymity of the agent of the action. In such cases, the place of the agent is most often vacant or occupied by the indefinite “one.”

These semantic prerequisites shed new light on the place of the word “crisis” in the presentation of the event and on the social meaning given to it. The pervasiveness of this pragmatic seme is such that it also affects other co-occurring or co-referential words, such as “war” and “conflict.” Hence we note “exiting the war” (sortir de la guerre), “emerging from the conflict” (sortir du conflit), and “resolving the conflict” (régler le conflit). These results are once again confirmed by an exploratory analysis on Frantext. We find a series of co-referential or co-occurring words that share a common pragmatic seme, realized by verbs or nominalizations, which are mostly collocations of the term “problem.” Over and above their proper meanings, these words all serve contextually as a vehicle for adopting a praxis in relation to the conflict, namely to resolve it. If we widen the scope of the word to enunciative heterogeneity, we note the regular occurrence of “crisis” in utterances in direct discourse, which are mainly attributable to politicians and “experts” (such as researchers or consultants) and to the exclusion of actors in the conflict. Newspapers showcase this community as the exclusive users of the word (whether or not they are in reality is another question). This brings with it the expression of a relationship posing the event as a problem.

To summarize, “crisis” carries a pragmatic seme and appears in political intertext. As a result, the event appears as a complex social object configured at the intersection of different worlds. Through intertextual dialogism, these political and expert worlds provide their vision of the event and their relationship to it. However, its problematic dimension is not reduced by the use of the word “problem” but is expressed through other semantic-discursive manifestations. In this sense, we might say that the word “crisis” has a structuring effect on the discourse.

8. In order to extend the description of the meaning of the word to all its uses, the seme [+that one must resolve] was reformulated as [+that one wants to see come to an end] (dont on veut voir arriver le terme) (Veniard 2013).
3. The Case of “Insecurity”

What can we learn from contemporary discourses in the area of security? This question arose while we were tackling the discourse on insecurity in the daily newspaper *Le Monde* during the presidential campaign of 2001 to 2002 (Née 2009). By choosing to input the word “insecurity” (*insécurité*) and its antonyms (“safety” (*sûreté*) and “security” (*sécurité*)), we were subscribing to the strong hypothesis that a lexical semantics linked to a discursive analysis would reveal discursive strategies. Yet, at the conclusion of a study incorporating the semantics of constructions and forms, it emerged that the internal semantic dynamism of words interacts with ideologies and the pragmatic orientation of utterances.

3.1. The Semantics of Constructions: A Gateway to Discourse

The lexical semantics detour initially raised more problems than it shed light on. In fact, the word “insecurity” is a problematic unit. Used on its own, it is difficult to interpret *a priori*. Furthermore, it presents a semantic ambiguity, referring as much to a situation of danger as to a psychological state. Faced with the powerlessness of a referential or structural approach to understanding the semantic functioning of the word, we turned instead to a semantics of constructions (Flaux and Van de Velde 2000). This approach led to the extraction of the following properties of the distributional, syntactic-semantic, and aspeclual criteria. From this point of view, “insecurity” enters the class of predicative nouns and is characterized by logical-semantic incompleteness. In fact, the word always infers the insecurity of something or someone,9 or to use the proper linguistic terminology, the insecurity of an actant A1. Accompanying insecurity therefore is an abstract place that only requires filling with another lexical unit and that directs the interpretation of the word. The logical-semantic link with the word filling the abstract place is attributive in its nature, for example, “the insecurity of citizens” could be reformulated as “citizens feel uneasy/in danger.” The word has a function close to names of states, denoting a psychological or physical and material state. For this reason, it requires constructions expressing a relationship with a cause. This enabled us to draw up a list of the constructions and linguistic resources available in French that serve to direct the interpretation of the word and allow us to remove its semantic ambiguity. These include classifiers such as “state,” “feeling,” and “situation” as well as relational adjectives such as “urban” and “social,” which all play an important role.

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9. The place opened up by the noun in fact particularly favors a human actant.
This seemed to be an effective approach to discourse analysis, whereby we would record the most specific constructions of the discourse in question and identify discursive phenomena. However, during the period 2001 to 2002, the discourses on insecurity in *Le Monde* were characterized by an apparent anomaly. The word “insecurity” is used alone almost systematically, preceded by a definite article, and its ambiguity rarely surfaces. It would seem therefore that the word conjured up the same thing for everybody during this time and that there was no need for writers to specify its meaning. It is in fact easy to reconstruct the abstract place that accompanied the word from the co-text and from the situation of utterance. In the majority of cases, it was either citizens (or voters) or an environment affected by crime. The under- or over-determination of the word shows a consensus of opinion that affected the electoral and media discourses during this period. The word “insecurity” is essentially imposed as a discursive equivalent of “crime” and more or less explicitly names “youth crime” as an insecurity factor. The underdetermination of the word in press discourse is therefore what is left unsaid, the unspoken, even the inexpressible. Among these is the naming of young immigrants as the main cause of insecurity. In such a context, the latent semantic ambiguity of the word is fruitful for the politician who addresses those citizens actually affected by crime as well as those who are responsive to the mediatization of crime and find a representation for their various fears.

3.2. The Role of Forms in the Negativity of Discourse

By stressing the cultural, social, and anthropological rooting of signs, Rey (1989) and Nyckees (1998) put forward their relentless internal dynamics, which etymological studies are able to access. Thus, we return “safety,” “security,” and “insecurity” to their common etymological roots, which stem from the etymon *cura* (concern, worry), which is affiliated to the Latin abstract noun and nominalized adjective *securitas*. This reconstruction highlights the semantic role of the privative prefix *se-*, meaning “absence of.”

With this return to forms, we are confronted here with a troubling fact. The prefix *se-* originally shows that the three words are conceptualization tools modified by negativity. The words “safety” and “security” represent first of all the absence of worry (for actant A1), and the word “insecurity” is controlled by a double negativity (prefixes *in-/se-*). The negativity of the sign clearly plays a part in the discourse over and above any ideological positioning. Both “security” and “safety” require antonyms, while “insecurity” frequently experiences negative reformulations before summoning its favorite partner, namely “security.” To talk
of “safety” or “security” is therefore also to talk of fear, danger, worry, or weakness. Delivering a political platform focused on the demand for more security means above all speakers incessantly repeating that they will fight against insecurity. This phenomenon appears magnified in an electoral context where certain formations thematize in particular a lack of security, constructing an “insecuritarian”

discourse in the process. When the word “insecurity” is used in the discourse in question, it initially presents a violent, aggressive, anxiety-producing environment before giving way to the affirmation of security as a positive value.

Finally, this semantic phenomenon, which stratifies a cultural and anthropological history from the concept of security, tells us something about political discourses that castigate insecurity and call for security. This is how these discourses catalyze fears and weaknesses linked to a situation (social, economic, etc.) and sound the alarm while positioning politics as the guarantor of a return to calm. During downturns, these discourses signal a confession of powerlessness.

**Conclusion**

Current developments in semantics coupled with recent directions taken by discourse analysis studies adopting a lexical approach facilitate a return to the LDA project. The project represented the first gateway to one of the postulates central to discourse analysis, namely the utterance versus the word. However, the fact that it was launched in an anti-semantic, epistemological context and that there was no semantic theory compatible with its theoretical presuppositions meant that it did not have the impact we might have wished for it. In our introduction, we posed two questions: What type of semantics are suitable for LDA, and why should we gain entry to discourse through words? Our response to the first question is that the semantics most compatible with LDA are praxeological, predicative, and anthropological. It may be possible in the future to have just one theory that incorporates these different aspects of meaning. For the present, however, we must call upon various semantic theories (depending on the constructed or unconstructed nature of words) that, unlike referential semantics, have allowed us to give an account of both an abstract noun (“insecurity”) and a noun referring to an abstract entity (“crisis”).

Our response to the second question is that the empirical analyses show that the word is not a unit curled up in a corner on its own, which only interacts with other units of the same type (according to the paradigmatic order). On the contrary, it interacts with all discourse units and connects

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10. We borrowed this expression from Fred Hailon (2011).
with the other dimensions of discursivity, namely the syntax, the text, the utterance, and the discourse. This leads us to venture some principles that appear fundamental to LDA:

1. The lexicon is essentially an organization and semantization principle of discourse;
2. LDA is a discourse analysis with lexical-semantic input. It is neither a semantic analysis within discourse nor a semantic analysis of discourse;
3. The linguistic properties of the units are linked to discursive functionings. They are neither considered nor disregarded in themselves;
4. Meaning must be considered in its predicative dimension. In other words the utterance takes precedence over the word.

Note however that we do not view this as a list of intangible principles but rather as a list of propositions inviting scientific dialogue.

Bibliography


