In considering whether cults have a distinctive way of recruiting their members in terms of the way they use language, two things need to be done. The first, which has already been established, is to ascertain whether the texts so far examined have anything in common in their use of persuasive language. Second, if there are commonalities one has to know if these are distinctive. That is the task of this chapter. While it is clear that some discourse features are common to the texts so far examined, these features are by no means exclusive to cult discourse. Indeed, we need only look to the cult discourse context, which will be defined shortly, to find exactly the same features. The discursive interactions within the cult context can be understood as a kind of language contact.

While cults are certainly discourse communities (along Swales’ lines), this concept does not seem to go far enough in explaining the position of cults in Western society. To do this fully it seems necessary to talk about a discourse context rather than just discourse communities. The notion of a discourse context incorporates Swales’ notion of a discourse community but focuses on the notion that discourse communities interact with each other. Discourse is given in response to discourse. For example, the cult discourse context includes, but is not limited to, the discourses produced by cults, anti-cult movements, academics working in the area and so on. To properly understand a discourse community, its position in a wider discourse context needs to be taken into account. To do this, features of anti-cult texts will be compared to the texts already analysed.

In terms of recruiting materials, cult groups pay no explicit attention to the efforts of anti-cult movements. However, strategies such as disclaimers and claim/denial structures constitute an implicit response to these anti-cult arguments. Anti-cult movements, on the other hand, rely on a very
specific understanding of what a cult is. Indeed, it is this understanding that they create and disseminate through these discourse practices; it is their prime activity and their defining feature. Further, these anti-cult discourses can be understood as the source of the myths that constitute and continue the ‘reality’ of ‘cults’.

The value of thinking about a cult discourse context, rather than just particular cult discourse communities, lies in seeing the differences and similarities between treatment of discourse topics. After considering a discourse context in relation to its persuasive strategies, the next step is to look outside the discourse context, to other contexts, to ascertain whether characteristic practices are distinctive. This will be done briefly in the next chapter. At the moment it is important to bear in mind that although cults and anti-cult groups are part of the same discourse context, there is a polarisation here. Anti-cult groups flow with the currents of the dominant ideology (epitomised by the media); cults work against them. Indeed the anti-cult movement arguably creates, and at least taps into, mainstream fears and prejudices.

Though there have only been a small number of texts subjected to detailed analysis, I will now attempt to draw some general conclusions about the features of cult texts. While there will be variation between the three, some of this may well be explained by Wallis’s tripartite division into world-affirming, world-accommodating and world-rejecting. The kind of variation that this division accounts for generally occurs at the content level. Scientology offers ways in which to improve one’s standing in the world, for example, by promising that members will be better students, workers and partners. This is in line with their world-affirming character. The Jehovah’s Witnesses, being a world-accommodating movement, offer advice about how to live a good life in the world as it is, despite the world’s many failings from their point of view. At the same time, some of the persuasive strategies are the same. The salient question here is whether these strategies are particular to cults, to the cult discourse context or, rather, to persuasive texts generally.

Memory

In this section, I will examine some of the general strategies used by the cult texts examined for persuasive purposes. The perlocutionary effect is a way of situating and understanding subsequent discourse practices. The meaning of memory in the analysis has already been discussed. This aspect of the analysis identifies what it is that the audience remembers (or what happens to them), what the perlocutionary effect is. At this point,