An examination of Ian Parker’s definitions of discourse reveals them to be non-distinctive and of limited utility. It is argued that discourse analysis should be integrated with, rather than set against, social psychology. Discourse analysts should attend to the issues of the representativeness and generality of their evidence, should be wary of attributing causality to discourse, and should consider the advantages of systematically investigating, rather than asserting, the social consequences of the use of different discourses.

This commentary is, of course, a discourse. A discourse analysis of it may reveal certain interesting devices, subtexts, statements and contradictions, implicit and explicit boundaries, social categorizations and particularization, mystifications, warrants, justifications and characterizations. However, the more interesting questions are likely to concern the circumstances preceding our writing it, how we (rather than someone else) came to be writing it, the issues on which it focuses, to whom it is addressed, what our intentions or motives regarding its impact are, and last, but not least, who will read (interpret) it and what they make of it? That is, the analysis of the text is of only limited value unless it is placed in the context of what people are doing with it. This cannot simply be inferred from the text itself, it requires systematic observation and analysis of social behaviour. In this commentary, we take a social psychological perspective in considering Ian Parker’s definitions and criteria for discourse analysis. We argue that if discourse analysis is to be considered a serious alternative to social psychology (cf. Potter and Wetherell, 1987), it is incumbent on its proponents to demonstrate its superiority in dealing with the same phenomena and issues that concern social psychologists. To the extent that discourse analysts simply change the premise of the questions (cf. K. Gergen,
1989a; Harré, 1989b) they deny the possibility of constructive dialogue with social psychology, and it becomes a matter of horses for courses. Our own preference is for integration of theory and method; to enrich discourse analysis and social psychology.

Ian Parker has proposed a set of criteria which may be used to define discourse, and three issues for reflection and analysis. Although there is much with which we agree, there are various assumptions and issues which require pause for thought. One general question must be how far the criteria define discourse as distinct from other facets of human life. Our major concern, however, is that although discourse can be regarded as the social process par excellence, it is portrayed by Parker as abstracted, reified and unconnected with individual or social psychological processes.

Parker's definition of discourse as a ‘system of statements which constructs an object’, attributes agency to the system rather than the users of the system (cf. Harré, 1989b). It is rather like suggesting that computer software produces output whilst ignoring the role of the programmer. Insofar as theoretical stances are a matter of stylistic preference (Zajonc, 1989), we prefer an analysis which focuses on the social processes underlying and flowing from people’s use of discourse.

Parker’s second criterion, ‘discourse is realized in texts’, seems to relate more to process than content. That is, anything which undergoes interpretation can be regarded as (a) discourse. It is unclear what delimits ‘texts’, but they would seem to include anything which is potentially interpretable. Once again, the role of the interpreter is obsured. Moreover, the idea that different discourses are ‘available’ to different audiences is also problematic. Is this something to do with the discourse or with the audiences’ ability to interpret it? Presumably, to the extent that something is interpreted, a discourse only exists if it is interpretable. An English person may be unable to read, write or speak in Japanese but we are perfectly capable of recognizing that the Japanese text on the back of a hifi system is intended to communicate information.

The third criterion, that, ‘a discourse reflects on its own way of speaking’, is also rather undistinctive. There is an ambiguity over how explicit the reflexivity must be. Certainly, discourse is used within linguistic and consensual frameworks, wherein ‘hot’ implies the opposite of ‘cold’, and ‘evil’ the opposite of ‘good’. However, it is unclear whether this is particularly a characteristic of discourse. Objects cannot exist unless they do so in relation to other objects. Similarly, the