
Discourse and Discourse Analysis: Key Concepts

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Abstract:

The current paper aims at reviewing the issues and the principles that might help readers to develop new and original methods of discourse analysis that suit their particular interests and goals exploring explicit theoretical assumptions.

Dealing with different language levels, linguists consider the discourse level the apex of linguistic description. The field of discourse analysis aims at uncovering the regularities of language that surpass the sentence. Discourse analysis is an interdisciplinary field which is applied in such fields where language has a particular relevance. Hence, the purpose of this paper is to briefly sketch out some of the key concepts in discourse analysis and major broad lines of research.

Key words: Discourse, text, context, discourse analysis, cohesion, coherence

1. INTRODUCTION

In order to comprehend what constitutes the knowledge of language, a noticeable shift of interest has moved, during the last few decades, from the sentence and its components to a concern with stretches of language that exceed sentence boundaries and go far beyond to encompass the world in which language is used. This relatively new approach, known as Discourse Analysis, covers nowadays a large body of literature, which explores into its nature, methods, scope and applications

in a number of fields. Questions such as: what is discourse? What is discourse analysis? Why discourse analysis? And what are its main lines of inquiry?, are the main concern of any attempt to deal with this type of analysis.

2. DISCOURSE: DEFINITION

The term 'discourse' has been differently defined and understood by various theorists. Crystal (1992:25) defines discourse as: "a continuous stretch of (especially spoken) language larger than a sentence, often constituting a coherent unit such as a sermon, argument, joke, or narrative". According to this definition, discourse is primarily seen as spoken language. Cook (1989) has a similar perspective of discourse; he defines it as "stretches of language perceived to be meaningful, unified and purposive" (Cook, 1989:106). Moreover, Brown and Yule (1983:01) state that:

the analysis of discourse is, necessarily, the analysis of language in use. As such, it cannot be restricted to the descriptions of linguistic forms independent of the purposes or functions which these forms are designed to serve in human affairs

In other words, discourse is produced as a social act in particular situation with the help of linguistic and non-linguistic means. It mainly conveys the notion of language use (parole).

Although a lot of studies have appeared in discourse area, there is no single approach to study discourse in linguistics. Yet, discourse can be analysed through three main perspectives: the formal, the empirical and the critical approach.

The formal approach to discourse treats discourse as text. Like 'structuralism'¹, the formal approach analyses the structure of

¹ Structuralism is a linguistic movement introduced by Ferdinand de Saussure (1857 - 1913) in the early 20th Century

the text. Yet, some linguists, like van Dijk (1972), refer to the formal analysis of discourse as ‘text linguistics’. van Dijk (1985c:4) explains that “Structural descriptions characterise discourse at several levels or dimensions of analysis and in terms of many different units, categories, schematic patterns, or relations”. The formal approach does not encompass aspects of context in which the discourse is used.

The empirical approach to discourse, also called ‘conversational analysis’ (Schegloff, 1972), studies not only the formal properties of conversational text but also the communicative competence of the speakers/writers, particularly their pragmatic knowledge of discourse.

The critical approach to discourse studies is broader than the two previous approaches. It includes all fields of social issues. A lot of scholars, such as Fairclough (1992) and van Dijk (1993) are concerned with critical discourse analysis scope. van Dijk (1993) explains that the main purpose of critical discourse analysts is to handle social problems relying on various disciplines such as sociology, linguistics and social cognition.

3. TEXT AND DISCOURSE

Broadly speaking, Discourse includes text. However, according to some linguists, text and discourse are two separate terms and concepts. According to Widdowson (2007), for example, a text is made up of sentences where as a discourse is the use of such sentences for communication.

Brown and Yule (1983:06) say that “text is the representation of discourse and the verbal record of a communicative act”. That is, the text refers to the physical product of a discourse.

Tannen (1983: 79) uses discourse to mean “anything beyond the sentence” which forms a text. Therefore, the terms discourse and text may be used interchangeably. Accordingly,

discourse refers to a stream of any language not just individual sentences out of their contexts (Tannen, 1983).

Furthermore, psychological researches have proved that there's not a strict one to one correspondence between the way hearers understand, store and remember a discourse and what was actually said (Dooly and Levinsohn, 2001).

A more clear and comprehensive definition of the terms is given by Halliday (1985: 290) when he says: “‘discourse’ itself is a process and the term ‘text’ is usually taken as referring to the product”. Therefore, a ‘text’ is a product or the set of sentences and ‘discourse’ refers to the meaning of such a text within a certain context. A discourse might be classified into two main types: transactional and interactional.

4. TYPES OF DISCOURSE

Discourse can be classified according to the communicative purpose they are fulfilling. Therefore, they can be divided into those discourses which are basically transactional in nature, and those which are basically interpersonal (Nunan, 1993). Some other linguists like Brown and Yule (1983) use the term interactional instead of interpersonal.

4.1 Transactional Discourse

Although language is used to perform many communicative functions, linguists and linguistic philosophers believe that the most important function is the communication of information. Lyons (1977) argues that his primary interest will be on the intentional transmission of factual, or propositional information.

The discourse used to convey or transmit specific information is called by linguists, like Brown & Yule (1983), and Nunan (1993), the transactional discourse. The main objective of the speaker /writer is efficient transference of information. It is very important that the receiver gets the informative message detail correct. The writer/ speaker should be as clearer

as possible in what he says or writes. Brown and Yule (1983) announce that there will be unfortunate results in real world if the information is not properly understood by the speaker/writer. The example which is generally given for transactional discourse is factual questions because people need an answer for a question (Keneeth, 2014)

4.2 Interactional Discourse

Sociologists and sociolinguists consider language as a means of establishing and maintaining relationship. People in such a type of discourse are particularly concerned with socializing. In this vein, Kasper (1990: 205) says: “Interactional discourse, by contrast, has as its primarily goal the establishment and maintenance of social relationships”. In other words, language in interactional discourse is used to fulfil a social purpose.

It is generally believed that written language is used for transactional purposes; though it is also possible to find texts which purpose is not primarily to inform but to maintain social relationships, e.g. thank you letters, love letters...etc.

Making such a distinction between transactional and interactional values of discourses does not mean that a given text will only fulfil one or other of these functions (Nunan, 1993). Many discourses that are mainly transactional in nature also carry social functions, and essentially social discourses can contain transactional features.

5. SPOKEN VS WRITTEN DISCOURSE

Speech and writing are two different modes of expressing linguistic meanings. Yabuuchi (1988) examines the most relevant distinctions between spoken and written language. He argues that the most innate difference between the two modes is laid in spontaneity of language production. He further explains that information is linearly presented in spoken form where as in order to convey the writer's intention, information is well organized in written discourse. Supporting the same

view, Tannen (1983: 81) says: “spoken discourse’ is typically spontaneous face-to-face conversation, and ‘written discourse’ is typically expository prose”. This statement explains that, in ‘expository’ prose, i.e. written discourse, content is relatively important where as in ‘face-to-face’ spontaneous conversation, the fact of speaking is more important than the content of the message conveyed.

By comparison, spoken and written discourses do, to some extent, make different demands on producing linguistic text. In this respect, Brown and Yule (1983:04) advocate: “The speaker has available to him the full range of ‘voice quality’ effect (as well as facial expression, postural and gestural system) [...] these paralinguistic cues are denied to the writer”. So, when people communicate, they make use not only of linguistic texts but of paralinguistic cues such as tones of voice, varying stress, pauses, facial expressions, features and so on, which help the speaker to override the meaning of the words he speaks.

In written discourse too, the shape of the text, its punctuation, or its arrangements on a page, may have significance over and above what it means or signifies linguistically. So, a written text may be accompanied by ‘multimodal’, that is, other modes of communication such as pictures, diagrams, charts and so on which may influence the linguistic meaning of a text (Widdowson, 2007:08).

Since the non-verbal and paralinguistic features are not available in writing, the writer must lexicalize the relations among ideas and his attitudes toward them (Tannen 1983: 83).

5.1 Lexical Density

Lexical density refers to estimated measure of content words over grammatical or functional words. Content words refer to nouns and verbs, while grammatical words are articles, pronouns and prepositions. In written discourse, content words are more frequently used than grammatical words. This means

that written language is lexically denser than the spoken language (Halliday, 1989).

5.2 Nominalization

In written texts, there is a high level of nominalization. This means that actions and events are presented as nouns rather than as verbs (Paltridge, 2006: 15). This phenomenon is referred to by Halliday (1989) as grammatical metaphor. In addition, longer noun groups occur more in written texts than in spoken texts which rather contain short noun groups. This makes the information more tightly packed into fewer words in written texts and less spread out than in spoken texts.

5.3 Explicitness

For Paltridge (2006), explicitness is not absolute. It depends on the purpose of the text or what the producer wants the receiver to understand and how direct he wants to be (ibid). Accordingly, persons can say something directly or infer it. Thus, as Biber (1988) suggests, the explicitness of these modes depends on what the speaker wants his hearer to understand. But, in fact, writing is more explicit because it is more pre-planned.

5.4 Grammatical Complexity

Written discourse is considered to be organized and carefully formulated. It conforms more to conventional rules of grammar. Its vocabulary is more precise and formal. Therefore, written texts are structurally more complex and elaborated than the spoken ones (Paltridge, 2006:13).

5.5 Contextualization

This phenomenon takes into account the context, that is the shared situation and knowledge that the spoken form possesses for interpretation. Therefore, since the written text does not depend on such a shared context, it is said to be more decontextualized than the spoken form (Paltridge, 2006:17). But in some situations such as personal letters, written form is

more dependent on a shared context than some spoken genres such as academic lectures. Similarly, written texts of fiction may provide their readers with a set of background knowledge that may help them enter into the world of the text (ibid).

5.5.1 Repetition, Hesitation and Redundancy

Spoken forms contain more repetition, hesitation and redundancy because they are produced in real time by speakers who are speaking and thinking at the same time. Another characteristic of spoken discourse is the use of pauses and fillers such as ‘hhh’, ‘you know’, ‘ummm’. This helps the speakers and gives them time to think about what they want to say while they are speaking (ibid). These pauses are also used in turn-taking where the speakers need to indicate that they want to start speaking after the person who is talking (Biber, 1988).

6. DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Many years ago, Firth (1935)² motivates linguists to study conversation by citing: “It is here that we shall find the key to a better understanding of what language is and how it works”

In the last few decades, discourse analysis has really been exploited as being a very important discipline because of a set of changes that have encouraged its interest (Jaworsky and Coupland, 1999).

Though discourse analysis is considered to be one of the main concerns of linguistics, other disciplines have contributed to its historical development and practices these years, such as psychology, sociology, etc (Davies and Elder, 2004: 133-134). In this sense, Brown and Yule (1983: viii) say: “Discourse analysis is used to describe activities at the intersection of disciplines as diverse as sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, philosophical linguistics and computational linguistics”.

² Quoted in Couthard, M (1977: 01)

Discourse analysis is a term which is frequently used by researchers interested in analysing language in relation to social, political, and cultural formations. Brown and Yule (1983:01) claim that discourse analysis is “the analysis of language in use”. The discourse analyst emphasises on “an investigation of what that language is used for”. That is, the function and purpose of communication (ibid).

Discourse analysis sheds light on the way speakers indicate their semantic intentions as well as the way hearers interpret what they hear. Hence, what the producer means does not all the time match with the receiver’s interpretation. Admittedly, Widdowson (2007:07) states: “As we all know from our experience, no matter how explicitly we think we have textualized what we want to say, there is always the possibility that it will be interpreted otherwise”.

Therefore, according to Widdowson, discourse analysts deal with what a producer meant by his text and what a text means to the receiver.

Moreover, discourse analysis treats the way sentences are combined with each other to form texts and discourses, and it describes real language in social contexts. Language does not occur alone, but rather, it does in social context. Showing the importance of context, Cook (2001:03) stresses the importance to examine “the context of communication: who is communicating, with whom and why; in what kind of society and situation, through what medium; how different types and acts of communication evolved, and their relationship to each other”. Therefore context is an important aspect to be considered in discourse analysis.

7. CONTEXT IN DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

As mentioned previously, context is very important for text analysis. Thus, as Brown and Yule say: “The discourse analyst has to take account of the context in which a piece of discourse appears” (1983:27). In fact, context, as a very broad concept,

has been distinctly defined by linguists depending on their domain of interest.

Widdowson (2000), who is interested on language meaning, considers context as “those aspects of the circumstance of actual language use which are taken relevant to meaning” (126). He adds “in other words, context is a schematic construct[...]the achievement of pragmatic meaning is a matter of matching up the linguistic elements of the code with the schematic elements of the context” (Widdowson, 2000:126).

When dealing with reference and inference, Brown and Yule define context as “aspects of extra-linguistic reality that are taken to be relevant to communication” (1983:128).

Halliday (1978) distinguishes “co-text”, which deals with the position of a particular word in a particular sentence or discourse, from “context, which is concerned with a particular situation in which a particular sentence or utterance occurs. However, in many cases, the term context is used to refer to both.

In his study of the discourse of advertising, Cook (2001) provides a set of features which characterize ‘context’. The features are as follows :

- 1- *Substance*: it refers to the physical material that carries text.
- 2- *Music and pictures*
- 3- *Paralanguage*: non-linguistic but meaningful behaviours that accompany language, such as voice quality, gestures, facial expressions, typeface choice and size of letters, etc.
- 4- *Situation*: “the properties and relations of objects and people in the vicinity of the text, as perceived by the participants” (ibid: 04).
- 5- *Co-text*: text which precedes or follows the analysed text, and which the participants consider as belonging to the same discourse.

- 6- *Intertext*: text that belongs to other discourse but which is associated with the text under consideration, and which influences its interpretation.
- 7- *Participants*: according to Cook, the participants refer to the senders, receivers, addressers and addressees. Hence, the sender and the receiver may not be the same as the addresser and the addressee respectively. In advertisements, for example, an actor can be an addresser but the sender is an advertising company. In the same example, the addressee may be a specific group of people but the receiver is any person who sees the advertisement. According to Cook, participants' intentions, interpretations, knowledge and beliefs, attitudes, affiliations and feeling are all part of the context.
- 8- *Function*: "what the text is intended to do by the senders and addressers, or perceived to do by the receivers and addressees" (ibid).

Recently, Okada (2007:186) provides a compilation of various authors' conceptions of context:

- *Physical context* **comprises the actual setting or environment in which the interaction takes place, such as a house-warming party or a hospital.**
- *Personal context* **comprises the social and relational relationships amongst the interactants, for instance the relationship between intimate friends or between employer and employees.**
- *Cognitive context* **comprises the shared and background knowledge. It is sometimes referred to as schemata. For example, knowledge about how an interview, a wedding or a lecture is conducted.**

- ***Textual context* comprises the worlds which the text constructs, that is the textual world**

Although, the opinions vary, all linguists agree that context play a very important role in analysing discourse. A discourse and its context are in close relationship: the discourse elaborates the context and the context helps to interpret the meaning of sentences in the discourse.

7.1 Cohesion

The term ‘cohesion’ refers to the words and phrases called text forming devices used by writers or speakers to establish relationships between sentences or utterances and which help to tie them in a text together (Nunan, 1993).

Therefore, with cohesion, we are concerned with the way an element- a pronoun, noun, or a conjugation-may refer backwards or forwards another clause. That is, cohesion occurs when the interpretation of some elements in the text depends on that of another. Halliday and Hasan (2013: 04) describe cohesion as:

Cohesion occurs where the INTERPRETATION of some elements in the discourse is dependent on that of another. The one PRESUPPOSES the other, in the sense that it cannot be effectively decoded except by resource to it. When this happens, a relation of cohesion is set up, and the two elements, the presupposing and the presupposed, are thereby at least potentially integrated into the text.

The concept of cohesion cannot be separated from the concept of text. The text which can be spoken or written, long or short forms a unified whole. What makes a text different from a non-text is the texture. The latter is defined by Halliday and Hasan (2013:02) as ‘the property of being a text’. Hence, such a texture is constructed and organized by the cohesive relations between the linguistic features. These relations or ties carry meaning, that’s why Halliday and Hasan (2013) describe cohesion as a

semantic phenomenon. The ties can be grammatical or lexical. Consequently, cohesion can be divided into grammatical and lexical which are going to be elaborated later in this chapter.

Nevertheless, as Yule (2010) explains, cohesion alone is not sufficient for a complete understanding of a text. It is easy to produce a highly cohesive text that contains a lot of connections between the sentences but very difficult to interpret it. Therefore, there should be another factor that helps readers or listeners to distinguish connected discourses that make sense from those that do not. Such factor is generally described as “coherence”.

7.2 Coherence

Yule (2010:144) has given a key to understand the concept of coherence. The key is “everything fitting together well”.

Coherence refers to those items that make a text hang together. Fairclough (1992: 83) describes coherent text as: “A text whose constituent parts (episodes, sentences) are meaningfully related so that the text as a whole ‘makes sense’, even though there may be relatively few markers [...]”.

So, coherence can be described as the relationships of different ideas in a text which are joined together to create a meaningful discourse. Those relationships may be based on people’s knowledge. Yule (2010:144) explains this idea by saying: “It is people who ‘make sense’ of what they read and hear. They try to arrive at an interpretation that is in line with their experience of the way the world is”. It means that meaningful connections, which are really expressed by words and sentences, could be created by readers depending on their shared knowledge.

As many linguists have pointed out (for example, Brown and Yule, 1983; and Widdowson, 1978), it is possible to have coherence without cohesion. Widdowson (1978:29) provides an example of an exchange between two persons:

- A- That's the telephone.
B- I'm in the bath.
A- Ok

This discourse does not contain formal links but can be understood as a coherent discourse: one person is requesting another to answer the telephone and the other is saying that s/he is not able to answer because s/he is having a bath.

Examples like these are interesting but, in fact, most coherent texts do display a set of cohesive devices.

Therefore, we can guess that cohesion contributes to the coherence of a text though it is not a sufficient condition. The following part tries to shed light on the main principles or patterns of cohesion.

8. CONCLUSION

The current paper has shown that the hybrid approach of discourse analysis provides new dimensions to linguistic analysis that transcend the sentence and seeks to reveal the regularities of the context of language use, at both: the linguistic and the extra linguistic levels. Accordingly, it is believed that a set of theoretical insights concerning this interplay between language and context can be drawn on to attain the resolution of practical problems in many domains that consider language use as a basic component. Thus, discourse analysis as a novel orientation has recently pervaded many fields such as second and foreign language teaching, translation studies, stylistic studies and so many others,

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