

Principles of Discourse Analysis in Linguistics

Abstract

This article considers that discourse analysis is not a method one can simply apply while doing psychological, sociological, anthropological or political scientific research. This article explains the different properties of discourse and the corresponding domains of discourse analysis. Moreover, it summarizes some of the basic principles of discourse analysis.

Key words: discourse, cognition, sequentiality, meaning, function, constructivity, semiotics, discourse analysis.

Discourse analysis is a method of studying and analyzing a text, be it in written or spoken form. This method does not really analyze a text when it comes to its structure and syntax, but the meaning behind these sentences; hence, the approach is often described as going “beyond the sentence.” Not only is discourse analysis a useful method in the field of linguistics, but is also applied in other areas such as social studies, psychology, and anthropology.

As the word “discourse” suggests, the method of discourse analysis focuses on any text that can provoke any kind of discourse, a response of any sort. In this way, it broadens the range of topics and subjects an analyst can use, such as in medical journals, newspaper articles, and even a president’s speech or a casual conversation. Take, for example, the medical journal: as the writer conveys his message through the book, the reader, in turn, responds by either understanding the words or ignoring it. In this way, discourse analysis looks further than the text by discovering what response, or discourse, the written word can incite and why.

The aim and the end result of a discourse analysis may not always be to give specific answers to a problem. By exploring a subject, it gives a newer and wider perspective on the issue and exposes the little implications that are hidden behind the words. It then leaves the readers to decide on how to respond to the analysis and ultimately make their own discourse. In a nutshell, discourse analysis does not answer, but interprets. I briefly state my own view of currently prevailing principles.

Naturally Occurring Text and Talk. Perhaps most pervasive in the study of discourse is the virtually exclusive focus on actually or naturally occurring talk and text. Unlike much work in formal linguistics and philosophy, invented or constructed examples are avoided in favor of examples and corpora of ‘real data’, for instance tape or video recordings of conversations, or actual texts used in the mass media or education. Data are in principle not edited or otherwise ‘sanitized’, but studied ‘as is’, that is, close to their actual appearance or use in their original contexts.

Contexts. Discourse should preferably be studied as a constitutive part of its local and global, social and cultural contexts. Text and talk in many ways signal their contextual relevance, and therefore context structures need to be observed and analysed in detail, also as possible consequences of discourse: settings, participants

and their communicative and social roles, goals, relevant social knowledge, norms and values, institutional or organizational structures, and so on. Despite the general recognition of the importance of contextual analysis, this principle is unfortunately more preached than actually practiced.

Discourse as Talk. Whereas much earlier discourse study, such as in literature or the media, focused on written texts, most contemporary discourse studies are oriented towards the analysis of ongoing verbal interaction in informal conversations as well as other, more formal or institutional dialogues. Indeed, talk is often considered as the basic or primordial form of discourse. On the other hand, although the earlier neglect of mundane, everyday conversation warranted such an orientation in discourse studies, it should not lead to a corresponding neglect of the vast domain of written texts in society.

Discourse as Social Practice of Members. Both spoken and written discourse are forms of social practice in sociocultural contexts. Language users are engaged in discourse not merely as individual persons, but also as members of various groups, institutions or cultures. Through their discourse, thus, language users may enact, confirm or challenge more comprehensive social and political structures and institutions.

Sequentiality. The accomplishment of discourse is largely linear and sequential, in the production and understanding both of talk and of text. This first implies that at all levels, structural units (sentences, propositions, acts) should be described or interpreted relative to preceding ones, as is most obvious in various forms of coherence. This discursive relativity may also involve functionality: later elements may have special functions with respect to previous ones. It also implies that language users operate, both mentally and interactionally, in an ‘on-line’ or ‘ongoing’ fashion, that is tentatively, possibly erroneously, but with the opportunity to reinterpret or repair previous activities and understandings.

Constructivity. Besides being sequential, discourses are constructive in the sense that their constitutive units may be functionally used, understood or analysed as elements of larger ones, thus also creating hierarchical structures. This applies to forms as well as to meaning and interaction.

Levels and Dimensions. Discourse analysts tend to theoretically decompose discourse at various layers, dimensions or levels and at the same time to mutually relate such levels. These levels represent different types of phenomena involved in discourse, such as sounds, forms, meanings, or action. Language users on the other hand strategically manage several levels or dimensions of discourse at the same time.

Meaning and Function. Both language users and analysts are after meaning: in their understanding and analysis, they will ask things like ‘What does this (she) mean here?’, or ‘How does this make sense in the present context?’ As is the case for other

principles, this principle also has functional and explanatory implications: 'Why is this being said/meant here?'

Rules. Language, communication as well as discourse are assumed to be rule-governed. Text and talk are analysed as manifestations or enactments of these socially shared grammatical, textual, communicative or interactional rules. At the same time, however, the study of actual discourse will focus on how rules may be violated, ignored or changed, and what the discursive or contextual functions are of such real or apparent violations.

Strategies. Besides rules, language users also know and apply expedient mental as well as interactional strategies in the effective understanding and accomplishment of discourse and the realization of their communicative or social goals. This relevance of strategies may be compared to the game of chess: chess players need to know the rules in order to play chess in the first place, but will use tactics, gambits, and special moves within an overall strategy to defend themselves or to win.

Social Cognition. Less generally recognized but no less relevant is the fundamental role of cognition, that is, of mental processes and representations in the production and understanding of text and talk. Few of the aspects of discourse discussed above (meaning, coherence, action, etc.) can be properly understood and explained without having recourse to the minds of language users. Besides personal memories and experiences of events (models), the shared sociocultural representations (knowledge, attitudes, ideologies, norms, values) of language users as group members also play a fundamental role in discourse, as well as its description and explanation. Indeed, in many ways, cognition is the interface between discourse and society.

Contemporary discourse analysis has come a long way since the early linguistic studies of pronouns and semantic coherence, the first observations of turn-taking in talk, the initial ethnographic studies of 'ways of speaking' in various cultures, or the early experiments with text comprehension. It has become not only a vast and multidisciplinary enterprise involving at least half a dozen disciplines, but also fairly sophisticated in several of its areas. So much so that unavoidable specialization has taken place and mutual comprehension is not always guaranteed. In that respect discourse analysis has come of age, and is now much like the other disciplines in the humanities and the social sciences, although its cross-disciplinary nature guarantees continuous renewal and inspiration at the borders of existing domains of knowledge. That is, despite vast differences of approach and method, we now find systematic analyses of text and talk from formal linguistics and artificial intelligence, to cognitive, social and educational psychology, to literary scholarship, semiotics and virtually all the social sciences. Discourse analysis thus moves from macro to micro levels of talk, text, context or society, and vice versa. It may examine ongoing discourse top down, beginning with general abstract patterns, or bottom-up, beginning with the nitty-gritty of actually used sounds, words, gestures, meanings

or strategies. And perhaps most importantly, discourse analysis provides the theoretical and methodological tools for a well-founded critical approach to the study of social problems, power and inequality. Following a number of characteristic principles, discourse analysis is thus taking its own place within the humanities and the social sciences. It has shown that it is able to provide insights in many social and mental phenomena that other disciplines might ignore or neglect. In that sense, discourse analysis is not a method one can simply apply while doing psychological, sociological, anthropological or political scientific research. As is the case for other important new cross-disciplines, such as the cognitive and neural sciences, or interdisciplines such as molecular biology or biochemistry, discourse studies claims to be an autonomous domain of study, with its own characteristic objects and phenomena, theories, methods and principles. For linguists and psychologists, discourse studies emphasizes that language use and thought typically and functionally manifest themselves in discursive social interaction. For social scientists, discourse analysis stresses that social and political institutions, organizations, group relations, structures, processes, routines, and many other relevant phenomena, also need to be studied at the level of their actual manifestations, expressions or enactment in discourse as language use, communication and interaction. There are few disciplines that offer such a broad, multidisciplinary, multicultural and socially relevant approach to human language, cognition, communication and interaction. Few disciplines allow students to focus on small but significant details of text and talk, as well as on the fascinating processes and representations of the social mind, and at the same time on the fundamental social and political issues and problems of our time. Few disciplines offer so many opportunities to combine formal precision with broad explanatory frameworks on how people use language, think and interact, and thus enact and reproduce their groups, societies and cultures.

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