

Original Paper

“Discourse” and “Discourse Analysis”: Front-burner Notions

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Abstract

In this study, we examine front-burner notions in two discrete terms: “discourse” and “discourse analysis”. Discourse analysis is not a new field of language study. This is why numerous notions abound therein, for the elucidation of language-related phenomena in human communication across genres. Some of the phenomena are so contentious that critical notions in discourse and discourse analysis continue to evolve. Discourse is human interaction. It has structure which is analyzed to reveal not just meanings, but also the underpinnings of such meanings. Linguistic conventions and extra-linguistic nuances underpin textual meanings to provide rich insights into the dynamics of language use in texts. A discourse analyst is interested in the discourse strategies deployed by speakers and writers for the purpose of effective communication. In this study, notions presented and examined are essentially explanative in terms of elucidating communicative strategies of language users. This view establishes the similarity between discourse analysis and pragmatics. The study concludes that discourse analysis is: context-based, functional, socially realistic, organizational structure, part of a whole, on-going communication and cross-disciplinary

Keywords

discourse, discourse analysis, participants, conversation, talk, text

1. Introduction

The communicative potentials of language accentuate its instrumentality in of discourse. Indeed, discourse and its associative elements (speaker/writer, topic, context etc.) reveal language as a generally acceptable means of human communication. In spite of the wide range of discourse genres that obtain in human communication, there are theoretical perspectives (notions) that foster the analysis of written and spoken texts (discourses). In this study, we present and examine major operational

notions as they relate to “discourse” and “discourse analysis”. Given the fact that texts, interactions or talks have linguistic and extra-linguistic components, the notions in the literature of discourse and discourse analysis provide comprehensive perspectives about the use of language in communicative events. Thus, this study is not only relevant, but also instructive.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Discourse

According to Brown and Yule (1983, p. 1), discourse is “language in use”. When language is used for communication in relation to varied topics, it can be referred to as discourse. Scholars hold the view that discourse is a structural and interactive instance of language use. According to Olugbenga Ibileye (2018, p. 1), the term “discourse” is “the theoretical basis of the emergence of the field of discourse analysis, is a pervading phenomenon, which governs human lives and daily activities sometimes in an unconscious way. Discourse has been variously conceived by scholars as the authentic product of human interaction as well as being the concrete aspect of the abstractness of communication. Scholars such as Stubbs, Coulthard, and Gee submit that discourse defines the human essence as it reflects what a speaker wants, who the speaker is and what the speaker does ...”

2.2 Text

A text is a form of communication with topic relevance. Texts engage participants and context simply because their topic relevance can be processed to decode message(s) therein. Ruth Wodak and Martin Resigl, cited in Deborah Schiffrin, Deborah Tannen and Heidi E. Hamilton (2001, p. 385) note that “we obviously need to think about what our ‘text’ is about, since clearly what a person is talking about has a bearing on what is said and how it is said. We also need to think about who said it, or who wrote it or signed it, who is thought, in its particular socio-cultural context, to be responsible for what it says, who the intended audience was and who the actual hearers or readers were, because who the participants in a situation are and how their roles are defined clearly influence what gets said and how. We need to think about what motivated the text, about how it fits into the set of things people in its context conventionally do with discourse, and about what its medium (or justify a certain social status quo (and ‘racialized’, ‘nationalized’ and ‘ethnicized’ identities to it). Third, they are instrumental in transforming the status quo (and ‘racializing concepts’, nationalities, ethnicities related to it). Fourth, discursive practices may have an effect on the dismantling or even destruction of the status quo (and of racist, nationalist, ethnicist concepts related to it). According to these general aims one can distinguish between constructive, perpetuating, transformational, and destructive social macrofunctions of discourse”. In addition, Fairclough (1992, p. 8) opines that “discourse constitutes the social. Three dimensions of the social are distinguished: knowledge, social relations, and social identity and these correspond respectively to three major functions of language. Discourse is shaped by relations of power, and invested ideologies” (Note 1).

3. Front-burner Notions in “Discourse” and “Discourse Analysis”

3.1 *Discourse as Social Phenomenon*

Arguably, discourse can be construed as socially realistic phenomena; the literature of “language and society” is replete with the view that sociolinguistic concepts such as “ethnicity” and “race” are ideologically underpinned. In this sense, the social relevance of discourse is brought to the fore. This view corroborates Ruth Wodak and Martin Resigl, cited in Deborah Schiffrin, Deborah Tannen and Heidi E. Hamilton (*ibid.*, p. 385) who posit that “discursive practices are socially constitutive in a number of ways: first, they play a decisive role in the genesis and production of certain social conditions. This means that discourses may serve to construct collective subjects like ‘races’, ‘nations’, ‘ethnicities’ etc. Second, they might perpetrate, reproduce, or justify a certain social status quo (and ‘racialized’, ‘nationalized’ and ‘ethnicized’ identities to it). Third, they are instrumental in transforming the status quo (and ‘racializing concepts’, nationalities, ethnicities related to it). Fourth, discursive practices may have an effect on the dismantling or even destruction of the status quo (and of racist, nationalist, ethnicist concepts related to it). According to these general aims one can distinguish between constructive, perpetuating, transformational, and destructive social macrofunctions of discourse”. The settings and contexts that convey discourse are indeed, social perspective of language use in the sense that they are about people, values, intentions, ideologies and norms of society that are invoked in discourses. Elite Olshtain and Marianne Celce-Murcia, cited in Deborah Schiffrin, Deborah Tannen and Heidi E. Hamilton (*ibid.*, p. 716) posit that “when using language for communication, we are faced with two major types of processes: transmitting our ideas and intentions to an addressee or interpreting and understanding the text or message produced by an interlocutor. The first places the initiator for the discourse at the production end of the continuum while the second places the interpreter at the reception end. When producing discourse, we combine discourse knowledge with strategies of speaking or writing, while utilizing audience-relevant contextual support. When interpreting discourse, we combine discourse knowledge with strategies of listening or reading, while relying on prior knowledge as well as on assessment of the context at hand ...” Human society is a place where value systems obtain. There are domains, role relations and ethics that constitute social structure. These variables give discourse participants opportunity of making references; referring expressions accentuate the fact that discourse picks social realities from the universe of discourse. According to Strawson (1950), “‘referring’ is not something an expression does; it is something that someone can use an expression to do”. The spread of research in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) reveals the socially realistic attribute of discourse; CDA elucidates social structure in terms of power, ideologies and the sociolinguistic underpinnings of these variables in a social system. Thus, discourse shows extra-linguistic nuances that are linked with language use. Stubbs (1983, p. 1) posits that “discourse is defined as “(1) concerned with language use beyond the boundaries of a sentence/utterance, (2) concerned with the interrelationships between language and society and (3) as concerned with the

interactive or dialogic properties of everyday communication”. Moreover, Dahunsi Toyese Najeem (2016, p. 174), notes that “the central focus of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is to see ideology as inherent in language use, and to see language use as a reflection of certain ideologies, beliefs, perceptions and affiliations”. Given the fact that discourse is “language in use”, it is a good means of depicting societal phenomena such as power, ideology, social stratification etc. Wodak (2003, p. 7) contends that “the complex interrelations between discourse and society cannot be analyzed adequately unless linguistic and sociological approaches are combined”. In making references or using referring expressions, speakers prove that language conveys socially realistic practices. The task before a discourse analyst is therefore to explain the relationship between language use and message, in terms of the linguistic conventions and extra-linguistic components deployed as communicative strategies. Thomas (1984, p. 74) rightly notes that discourse analysis is “that aspect of linguistics which is concerned with the study of socially situated speech ... united by an interest in extended sequences of speech and a sensitivity to social context”.

3.2 Discourse as Denoting Functionality

The functional perspective of discourse is evident in the use of speech acts in communicative events for different purposes: to give orders, to persuade, to inform, to advise, to assert, to ascribe, etc. See Bach and Harnish’s (1979) speech act taxonomy for more examples of speech act categories. Gillian Brown and George Yule (1983, p. 25) assert that “the discourse analyst ... is interested in the function or purpose of a piece of linguistic data and also in how that data is processed, both by the producer and by the receiver. It is natural consequence that the discourse analyst will be interested in the results processing experiments in a way which is not typical of the sentence-grammarians. It also follows that the work of those sociolinguists and ethnographers who attempt to discuss language in terms of user’s purposes will also be of interest”. Indeed, the references that speakers make to social values are essentially actions. According to Wodak (2007, p. 209), “CDA takes a particular interest in the ways in which language mediates ideology in a variety of social institutions”.

3.3 Discourse as Organizational Structure

Effective use of language for communication presupposes appropriate selection and use of words. It also necessitates proper arrangement of linguistic units. These features foster textual cohesion. Writers’ mastery of linguistic conventions is instrumental in good use of language. As instruments for organizing discourse, grammatical categories facilitate tie, coherence and effective delivery of message in texts. Deborah Schiffrin, cited in Deborah Schiffrin, Deborah Tannen and Heidi E. Hamilton (ibid., p. 54) submit that “the production of coherent discourse is an interactive process that requires speakers to draw upon several different types of communicative knowledge that complement more code-based grammatical knowledge of sound, form, and meaning per se. Two aspects of communicative knowledge closely related to one another are express and social: the ability to use language to display personal and social identities, to convey attitudes and perform actions, and to negotiate relationships

between self and others. Others include a cognitive ability to represent concepts and ideas through language and a textual ability to organize forms, and convey meanings, within units of language longer than a single sentence". The use of lexical items and discourse markers in texts serve the main purpose of organizing the discourse. Discourse analysis identifies and explains the resources of language used in texts, for the purpose of conveying message. The functional dimensions of language can be explained via an analysis of linguistic rules in written communication. Diane Blakemore, cited in Deborah Schiffrin, Deborah Tannen and Heidi E. Hamilton (ibid., p. 102) posit that "coherence relations are structural relations which hold in virtue of formal properties of utterances". Proper organization of discourse shows the links that obtain between parts (micro-structures) of whole (macro-structures). Fauconnier (1996; 1997) notes that "discourse construction starts in a base space, from which a set of spaces related to each other will evolve, and these spaces build up a cognitive structure. At any point in the dynamic unfolding of space configurations, only one space is in focus, and the focus can be switched via grammatical and pragmatic devices. Spaces are connected in two major ways: a. by ordering relation, for each space ... introduced relative to another which is its "parent" and only when a space is in force can it launch a new space; b. by connectors linking element across spaces in line with identification and expectation principles. Transference across spaces is carried out in the following ways:

- Optimization: It is a kind of downward transfer. Presuppositions can pass automatically from parent space to child space as long as there is no explicit contradiction;
- Access: Creation of counterparts according to the identification principle;
- Upward floating: Presuppositions can pass through from lower structure to higher ones until they meet themselves or their opposite".

Susan Hunston (2013, p. 618) is instructive in terms of the significance of organization in textual communication.

3.4 Discourse as Part of a Whole

A fact about texts or discourses is that apart from participants' views, propositions can also be multiple. This is evident in the sentences therein. Participants of discourse normally make references to states-of-affairs (social institutions) in the universe of discourse, thus revealing discourse as "part of a whole". It is important to note that cohesive devices foster tie among fragments in discourses. Texts or discourses usually have antecedents that relate with an on-going communicative activity. In this sense, discourse is indeed, "part of a whole". The antecedents relate with on-going discourse subject (topic relevance). See Sperber and Wilson (1986) for tips on the term "topic relevance". Instructively, Gillian Brown and George Yule (ibid., p. 80) note that "within the presupposition pool for any discourse, there is a set of discourse subjects and each discourse is, in a sense, about its discourse subjects. Because it is part of the shared assumptions of the discourse participants that these discourse subjects exist, they do not need to have their existence asserted in the discourse". The view that discourse is a "part of a

whole” is corroborated by Asher and Simpson (1994, p. 940) who opine that “discourse is “a discrete subset of a whole language”.

3.5 Discourse as a Genre-specific Concept

In written and spoken communication, there are typologies: religious sermons, political speeches, doctor-patient interactions, buyer-seller discourses, etc. Essentially, these categories count as discourse genres. Each genre has some level of peculiarities which a discourse analyst is expected to reveal. According to Gillian Brown and George Yule (ibid., p. x), “...a wide array of linguistic ‘texts’ are explored in the study of discourse. These might consist of a conversation or a letter; a speech, a memo or a report; a broadcast, a newspaper article or an interview; a lesson, a consultation or a confrontation encounter; an advertisement of flier or a piece of gossip. Discourse analysts are as concerned (if not more so) to examine the way in which meaning is constructed throughout the text, as with the way this is achieved at any one point in the text”.

3.6 Discourse as Context

There are different contextual nuances that can be identified from any discourse. Citing NOUN (2010), Butari Nahum Upah (2018, p. 19) reports features of the physical context of communicative event:

- (i) Participants, e.g., boys, girls, men, traders
- (ii) Ongoing activity, e.g., playing, chatting, debating
- (iii) The place, e.g., church, class, stadium, diningtable
- (iv) The time, e.g., time of the day or season”.

The idea of context establishes “discourse” and “discourse analysis” within the purview of pragmatics. Discourse analyst investigates the features that link language users, utterances, and pragmatic variables such as presupposition, and implicature (inference-making). Gillian Brown and George Yule (ibid., p. 26) opine that “the discourse analyst treats his data as the record (text) of a dynamic process in which language was used as an instrument of communication in a context by a speaker/writer to express meanings and achieve intentions (discourse). Working from this data, the analyst seeks to describe regularities in the linguistic realizations used by people to communicate those meanings and intentions”. In putting language to actual use (discourse), participants actualize context phenomenon and build it by invoking the appropriate states-of-affairs (social institutions). In this process, writer-reader or speaker-hearer shared knowledge makes the communication activity successful.

3.7 Discourse Analysis as Cross-Disciplinary Concept

The topic relevance of a particular discourse is linked with other subjects/topics as the discourse expands. This is what obtains in natural human communication; one text reads another (intertextuality). In this regard, discourse is cross-disciplinary (Note 2). It is instructive to note that cross-field perspective does not only result in cross-fertilization of ideas, but also expands research concerns in “discourse” and “discourse analysis”. Gillian Brown and George Yule (ibid.) posit that “the term, ‘discourse analysis’, has come to be used with a wide range of meanings, which cover a wide range of

activities. It is used to describe activities at the intersection of disciplines as diverse as sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, philosophical linguistics and computational linguistics. Scholars working centrally in these different disciplines tend to concentrate on different aspects of discourse. Sociolinguists are particularly concerned with the structure of social interaction manifested in conversation and their descriptions emphasize features of social context which are particularly amenable to socio-logical classification. They are concerned with generalizing across ‘real’ instances of language in use, and typically work with transcribed spoken data. Psycholinguists are particularly concerned with issues related to language comprehension. They typically employ a tight methodology derived from experimental psychology, which investigates problems of comprehension in short constructed texts or sequences of written sentences. Philosophical linguists, and formal linguists, are particularly concerned with semantic relations between constructed pairs of sentences and with their syntactic realizations. They are concerned, too, with relationships between sentences and the world in terms of whether or not sentences are used to make statements which can be assigned truth-values”. Research domains evolve to cope with changing societal phenomena. The cross-disciplinary feature of discourse analysis is the product of its evolving attribute. Deborah Schiffrin, Deborah Tannen and Heidi E. Hamilton (ibid., p. 1) submit that “discourse analysis is a rapidly growing and evolving field. Current research in this field now flows from numerous academic disciplines that are very different from one another. Included, of course, are the disciplines in which models for understanding and methods for analyzing discourse first developed, such as linguistics, anthropology, and philosophy. But also included are disciplines that have applied – and thus often extended – such models and methods to problems within their own academic domains, such as communication, cognitive psychology, social psychology, and artificial intelligence”. Arguably, approaches to discourse analysis are products of its cross-disciplinary and evolving nature.

3.8 Discourse as On-going Communication

Human beings interact in a particular place and at a particular time. Such an interaction is referred to as “discourse” irrespective of whether it is a spoken or written communication. Pragmatic elements (implicature, presupposition, speech act, inference, context etc.) retain their meanings in terms of how they impinge on on-going communication. According to John J. Gumperz, cited in Deborah Schiffrin, Deborah Tannen and Heidi E. Hamilton (ibid., p. 218), “to interact is to engage in an ongoing process of negotiation, both to infer what others intend to convey and to monitor how one’s own contributions are received. In other words, what is at issue is shared or non-shared interpretations rather than denotational meaning”.

4. Conclusion

This study presents front-burner notions on “discourse” and “discourse analysis”, and examines them incisively. Discourse is language deployed in communicative activity, and the analysis of discourse

concerns its elements: topic, participants, organization, cohesive devices, decoding of meaning and contextual underpinnings. The relationship between the terms “discourse” and “discourse analysis” accentuates the claim that linguistic and contextual factors inform and explain the use and interpretation of language. The front-burner notions on “discourse” and “discourse analysis examined in this study provide comprehensive perspectives on what the two terms mean, irrespective of the divergent views that abound in the literature concerning their meanings (Note 3).

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Notes

Note 1. Commenting on “participant”, “topic” and “context” as features of a text, Johnstone, cited in Olugbenga Ibileye (ibid., pp. 6-7) submits that “we obviously need to think about what our ‘text’ is about, since clearly what a person is talking about has a bearing on what is said and how it is said. We

also need to think about who said it, or who wrote it or signed it, who is thought, in its particular socio-cultural context, to be responsible for what it says, who the intended audience was and who the actual hearers or readers were, because who the participants in a situation are and how their roles are defined clearly influence what gets said and how. We need to think about what motivated the text, about how it fits into the set of things people in its context conventionally do with discourse, and about what its medium (or media) of production has to do with what it is like. We need to think about the language it is in, what that language encourages speakers and writers to do and what it is relatively difficult to do in that language. We need to think about the text's structure, and how it fits into larger structures of sets of texts and sets of interactions".

Note 2. Scholars use the labels "textual chains", "intertextuality", "interdiscursivity", "orders of discourse" and "hybridity" to capture this feature of discourse. See Ruth Wodak and Martin Reisigl, cited in Deborah Schiffrin, Deborah Tannen and Heidi E. Hamilton (ibid.) for insights on cross-field perspective of discourse

Note 3. Instructively, Deborah Schiffrin, Deborah Tannen and Heidi E. Hamilton (ibid., p. 1) note that "...it is no surprise that the terms 'discourse' and 'discourse analysis' have different meanings to scholars in different fields. For many, particularly linguists, 'discourse' has generally been defined as anything beyond the sentence. For others (for example, Fasold (1990, p. 65), the study of discourse is the study of language use. These definitions have in common a focus on specific instances or spates of language".