
**Tikrit University**

**College of Education for Humanities**

**English Department**

**M.A Studies / Discourse Analysis**

# Discourse and Society

**Dr. Muhammed Badea Ahmed**

## Discourse and Society

The previous chapter discussed the social-situatedness of discourse; that is, that spoken and written discourse occurs in particular social and cultural settings and is used and understood in different ways in different social and cultural settings. This chapter will discuss, in more detail, important aspects of the social and cultural settings of spoken and written discourse. It will start with a discussion of the notion of discourse communi□ties . It will then discuss the various ways we express our social identity through discourse. One of the identities we express is our gendered identity . This is a topic that has been discussed at great length (and in changing ways) in the area of discourse analysis and is discussed along with discourse and identity in this chapter. The issue of ideology and discourse , a further important topic in the area of discourse analysis, is also discussed in this chapter.

### 2.1 Discourse communities

A key notion in the area of discourse analysis is the concept of discourse community (see box on the next page for definition). Swales ( 1990 ) provides a set of characteristics for identify□ing a group of people as members of a particular discourse community. The group must have some set of shared common goals, some mechanisms for communication and some way of providing the exchange of information among its members. The community must have its own particular genres, its own set of specialized terminology and vocabulary and a high level of expertise in its particular area. These goals may be formally agreed upon (as in the case of clubs and associations) 'or they may be more tacit' (24). The ways in which people communicate with each other and exchange information will vary according to the group. This might include meetings, newsletters, casual conversations or a range of other types of written and/or spoken communication. That is, the discourse community will have par□ticular ways of communicating with each other and ways of getting things done that have developed through time. There will also be a threshold level of expertise in the use of the genres the discourse community uses for its communications for someone to be considered a member of that community. 16 Discourse Analysis A discourse community is a group of people who share some kind of activity. Members of a discourse community have particular ways of communicating with each other. They generally have shared goals and may have shared values and beliefs. A person is often a member of more than one discourse com□munity. Someone may be a university student, a member of a community volunteer organization and a member of a church group, for example. The ways in which they communicate in each of these groups, and the values and beliefs that are most prominent in each of these groups may vary. There may also be discourse communities within discourse communities. Academic departments, for example, may differ in the ways that they do things and the beliefs and values that they hold, as indeed may other parts of the university. A telephone call centre is an example of a discourse community. Cameron's ( 2000 ) study of telephone call centres in the United Kingdom suggests what some of the characteristics of this kind of discourse community might be. She found, for example, that the telephone operators in the call centres she examined were trained to communicate with customers on the phone in very particular ways. They were trained to answer the phone 'with a smile in their voice'. They were asked to pay attention to the pitch of their voice so that they conveyed a sense of confidence and sincerity in what they said. They were required to talk

neither too loudly nor too quietly. They were trained not to drag out what they said, or to speed through what they were saying. They were also required to provide sufficient feedback to their callers so that the callers knew they had been understood. Call centre workers also have common goals, that of providing the service or making the sales for which the centre is set up, common ways of sharing information among telephone workers, their own particular service call genres and their own terminology and vocabulary for the product or service they are dealing with. There is also a specific level of expertise required for successful call centre workers, both in the knowledge of the product or service, and in the way call centre workers deal with their callers. New workers may be hired for a probationary period, for example, until it is clear that they have met the threshold level of performance required to be members of the particular call centre discourse community. If they do not meet this threshold level, their position with the company may be terminated. People do, however, have different degrees of membership of discourse communities and at times the borders between them may not always be clear cut. That is, discourse com□munities may consist of close-knit networks of members such as writers of poetry and their readers, or loose-knit groups of members such as advertising producers, consumers and contributors to online discussion boards. Discourse communities may also be made up of several overlapping groups of people. People, further, may be (and normally are) members of more than just the one single discourse community. A person, thus, may be a call centre operator, a member of a poetry group, a member of a school parent–teacher group and a contributor to an online discussion board. A person may also have to operate in a number of different roles in the same discourse community. For example, a person may be working Discourse and Society 17 towards a doctoral degree in one part of a university and in another part of the university be a new (or indeed long-standing) member of academic staff. The 'ways of belonging' may be quite different in each of these parts of the discourse community, as may be the genres that people use and the social relations within the different parts of the discourse community (see Ohashi, Ohashi and Paltridge 2008 for an example of this). Discourse communities also interact with wider speech communities . For example, the academic discourse community of students and academics also interacts with the wider speech community of the town or city in which the academic institution is located (Swales 1993 ). It is for these reasons that some people prefer the term communities of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991, Wenger 1998 , 2006 ; Meyerhoff 2002 , Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2007) to the term 'discourse community'. Devitt ( 2004 : 42–4) adds to this discussion by proposing three types of groups of lan□guage users: communities , collectives and networks. Communities are 'groups of people who share substantial amounts of time together in common endeavors', such as a group of people who all work in the same office. Collectives are groups of people that 'form around a single repeated interest, without the frequency or intensity of contact of a community', such as people who are members of a bee-keeping group, or voluntary members of a community telephone advice service. Networks are groups of people that are not as tightly knit as speech communities with connections being made by one person 'who knows another person, who knows another person', such as connections that are made through email messages sent and received by people who may never have met each other (and perhaps never will), but are participating in a common discourse.

## 2.2 Language as social and local practice

Speakers, then, often have a repertoire of social identities and discourse community memberships. They may also have a linguistic repertoire that they draw on for their linguistic interactions. That is, they may have a number of languages or language varieties they use to interact in within their particular communities. This kind of situation is common in many parts of the world. The choice of language or language variety may be determined by the domain the language is being used in, such as with family, among friends and in religious, educational and employment settings. Social factors such as who we are speaking to, the social context of the interaction, the topic, function and goal of the interaction, social distance between speakers, the formality of the setting or type of interaction and the status of each of the speakers are also important for accounting for the language choice that a person makes in these kinds of settings (Holmes 2008 ). The US legal drama The Good Wife (CBS 2011 ) provides an example of the use of language by the same speaker in different social, professional and personal settings. The lead character in the show, Alicia Florrick, returns to the legal profession after many years of being a homemaker when her husband goes to jail following a sex and corruption scandal. 18 Discourse Analysis In the show, she is a lawyer, a mother, the wife of a disgraced former state attorney and has a romantic relationship with a colleague in the law firm in which she works. She behaves, and uses language differently, when she is in each of these different situations, depending on whether she in her office, in a court of law or at home in her apartment. The way she speaks also depends on the role which is most prominent at the time, who she is speaking to, and the purpose of the interaction in which she is engaged. A further example of the connection between language variation and group membership can be seen is Qing Zhang's research ( 2005 , 2008 ) into the language of managers in state-owned and foreign-owned businesses in Beijing. In her (2005) paper 'A Chinese yuppie in Beijing', she identifies a number of pronunciation features in the use of language by managers of the foreign-owned companies that, she argues, are signs of the development of a cosmopolitan variety of Mandarin Chinese that is associated with a new transnational professional identity. She argues that the possession of this variety gives the speakers linguistic capital that, in turn, brings them both material and symbolic rewards in their particular setting. Zhang ( 2012 ) further discusses emerging varieties of Chinese in her study of the use of language by Chinese television talk show hosts. She shows how, through the use of innovative phonological, lexical and syntactic features, as well as a mixing of English and Mandarin, a new cosmopolitan style of Mandarin is employed. This particular style indexes the cool, trendy and cosmopolitan personae of the two hosts. This is a key part of the symbolic repertoire of people who are part of this new cosmopolitan Chinese lifestyle. Each of these examples highlights the point made by Litossoleti ( 2006 ), Eckert ( 2008 ) and Pennycook ( 2010 ) that language is both a social (Litossoleti and Eckert) and local (Pennycook) practice, and the meanings that are made through the use of language are based in the ideologies, activities and beliefs of what it means to be in a particular place, at a particular time and in a particular setting. In the words of Eckert: people fashion their ways of speaking, moving their styles this way or that as they move their personae through situations from moment to moment, from day to day, and through the life course. (2008: 463) In this process, she

argues, ‘people do not simply use social meaning – they both produce and reproduce it’ (ibid.).

## 2.3 Discourse and gender

Early work in the analysis of gender and discourse looked at the relationship between the use of language and the biological category of sex. This has now moved to an examination of the ways language is used in relation to the social category, or rather the socially constructed category , of gender . Thus, from the moment a female child is born and someone says ‘It’s a Discourse and Society 19 girl!’ that child learns how to do being a girl in the particular society and culture, from the way she talks through to the way she walks, smiles, dresses and combs her hair (Butler 1993 , Livia and Hall 1997 ). Gender, then, is not just a natural and inevitable consequence of one’s biological sex (Weatherall 2002 ). It is, rather, ‘part of the routine, ongoing work of everyday, mundane, social interaction’; that is, ‘the product of social practice’ (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003 : 5). Gender, further, as Swann ( 2002 : 47) has pointed out: has come to be seen as highly fluid, or less well defined than it once appeared. In line with gender theory more generally, researchers interested in language and gender have focused increasingly on plurality and diversity amongst female and male language users, and on gender as performativity – something that is ‘done’ in context, rather than a fixed attribute. Simone de Beauvoir famously said ‘one is not born, but rather becomes a woman’. Performativity is based on the view that in saying something, we do, or ‘become’ it. A person learns, for example, how to do and, in turn ‘display’, being a woman in a particular social setting, of a particular social class. People perform particular identities through their use of language and other ways of expressing them□selves in their interactions with each other. Mostly, this is done unconsciously as we ‘repeat acts’ such as gestures, movement and ways of using language that signify, or index a particular identity. These acts are not, however, natural nor are they part of the essential attributes of a person. They are part of what people acquire in their interactions with each other Many of the conversations in the TV show Sex and the City are examples of the way the lead characters, through their use of language, do gender. In the following extract, Miranda asks Carrie why she accepted her boyfriend’s proposal of marriage. In her response, Carrie both enacts and affirms, through her use of language, her gendered identity, that of a woman who, because she loves her boyfriend, has to accept his proposal of marriage: Miranda: I’m going to ask you an unpleasant question now. Why did you ever say yes? Carrie: Because I love him . . . a man you love kneels in the street, and off ers you a ring. You say yes. Th at is what you do. (King 2002) The discussion of how men and women speak, and what they do as they speak, has also been extended to how people speak about men and women. Holmes ( 2004 ), for example, compared the use of the terms woman and lady and found that the social significance of these terms has changed over the last 30 years. She found woman , for example, has moved from being marked as impolite to a situation where this is no longer the case (although woman is more frequently used in written British English than in spoken British English). She also found that while lady/ladies may be used as a politeness marker in formal settings nowadays, however, in informal settings it is also used to trivialize 20 Discourse Analysis and patronize (see Mills 2008 , Mills and Mullany 2011 for further discussion of sexist language). As Holmes ( 2004 : 156) argues, language choices are often

enactments of who's in charge and 'whose values will prevail'. Identity is, equally, conveyed through writing as well as through speech. Richardson's ( 2000 ) study of the use of disparaging language and sexually humiliating formulae by male members of a cricket club in their newsletter to talk about women provides an example of this. Richardson found that the men in her study used their language and the traditional 'women only' discourse of gossip to create solidarity as a group, and to construct their heterosexual masculinity, as did Cameron ( 1999 ) in her study of talk between fraternity brothers in the United States. The students writing in Richardson's cricket club newsletter used a language they called 'Dross' as a way of creating an in-group identity as members of the club. One of the members she interviewed said 'It's the one thing that really does set [the Club] apart from other Clubs' (60). The members also gossiped about women, sex and alcohol in the newsletter as a way of creating solidarity among themselves. This was often done through the use of formulaic language such as Rumour has it that . . . to indicate that what was about to be said was gossip, and may not necessarily be true. Richardson argues that the members' identities presented in the newsletter are constructed through differentiation. That is, the members of the cricket club defined themselves 'by that which they are not' (65). They wrote, they said, in ways that are different from members of other cricket clubs. They also described the club as a heterosexual-only zone by using terms such as 'poofter' and 'poofs' (derogatory terms for gay men) as out-group naming strategies, reinforcing the expectation that members of the club will be heterosexual and that the identity of homosexual male is not appropriate for membership of the club. The following extract from the newsletter illustrates this: [The Cricket Club]'s Presentation Night for 97/98 will be at the MCG [a cricket stadium] on April 3. Players, partners, parents, patriarchs, presenters, poofs (sorry, no poofs) are all welcome to attend. (Richardson 2000 : 70) Hall's ( 1995 ) study of the use of language by telephone sex workers in the United States provides a further example of how speakers create gendered identities through their use of language. Not all of the sex workers in Hall's study were heterosexual, although this was the persona they were projecting; nor were they all female. One was a male Mexican American who took pride in being able to 'replicate' Asian, Latina and Black women's personas though his use of accent, intonation, voice quality and choice of vocabulary. The workers, thus, used 'gendered styles to construct sexual meaning' (Cameron and Kulick 2003 : 59). Gender, then, is 'not something a person "has", but something that a person does' (Cameron 2005a : 49). Gender (and in turn other identities) is not a result of what people (already) are but a result of, among other things, the way they talk and what they do. Discourse and Society 21 As Eckert and McConnell-Ginet ( 2003 : 4) argue: gender doesn't just exist, but is continually produced, reproduced, and indeed changed through people's performance of gendered acts, as they project their own claimed gender identities, ratify or challenge other's identities, and in various ways support or challenge systems of gender relations and privilege. Sex and the City provides many examples of the lead characters doing gender identity of a certain kind (among other things, independent successful professional New York City women of a certain age and certain social class) not only in the way they talk but also in the way they dress, and the way they behave as they speak to each other, their lovers and their friends. What to some people, then, may seem natural in their interactions is a result of what Butler ( 1990 : 33) calls 'a set of repeated acts' and a 'repeated stylisation of the body'.