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What is Discourse Analysis

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Discourse Analysis

1.1 What is discourse analysis?

Discourse analysis examines patterns of language across texts and considers the relationship between language and the social and cultural contexts in which it is used. Discourse analysis also considers the ways that the use of language presents different views of the world and different understandings. It examines how the use of language is influenced by relationships between participants as well as the effects the use of language has upon social identities and relations. It also considers how views of the world, and identities, are constructed through the use of discourse. The term discourse analysis was first introduced by Zellig Harris (1952) as a way of analysing connected speech and writing. Harris had two main interests: the examination of language beyond the level of the sentence and the relationship between linguistic and non-linguis tic behaviour. He examined the first of these in most detail, aiming to provide a way for describing how language features are distributed within texts and the ways in which they are combined in particular kinds and styles of texts. An early, and important, observation he made was that:

connected discourse occurs within a particular situation – whether of a person speaking, or of a conversation, or of someone sitting down occasionally over the period of months to write a particular kind of book in a particular literary or scientific tradition. (3)

There are, thus, typical ways of using language in particular situations. These discourses , he argued, not only share particular meanings, they also have characteristic linguistic features associated with them. What these meanings are and how they are realized in language is of central interest to the area of discourse analysis.

The relationship between language and context

By 'the relationship between linguistic and non-linguistic behaviour' Harris means how people know, from the situation that they are in, how to interpret what someone says. If, for example, an air traffic controller says to a pilot The runway is full at the moment , this most likely means it is not possible to land the plane. This may seem obvious to a native speaker of English but a non-native speaker pilot, of which there are many in the world, needs to understand the relationship between what is said and what is meant in order to understand that he/she cannot land the plane at that time. Harris' point is that the expres sion The runway is full at the moment has a particular meaning in a particular situation (in this case the landing of a plane) and may mean something different in another situation. If I say The runway is full at the moment to a friend who is waiting with me to pick someone up from the airport, this is now an explanation of why the plane is late landing (however I may know this) and not an instruction to not land the plane. The same discourse, thus, can What is Discourse Analysis?

3 be understood differently by different language users as well as understood differently in different contexts (van Dijk 2011). Van Dijk provides two book length accounts of the notion of context. He argues that context is a subjective construct that accounts not only for the uniqueness of each text but also for the common ground and shared representations that language users draw on to communicate with each other (van Dijk 2008). Van Dijk (2009) argues, further, that the link between society and discourse is often indirect and depends on how language users them selves define the genre or communicative event in which they engaged. Thus, in his words, '[i]t is not the social situation that influences (or is influenced by) discourse, but the way the participants define (original emphasis)' the situation in which the discourse occurs (van Dijk 2008 : x). In his view, contexts are not objective conditions but rather (inter)subjective constructs that are constantly updated by participants in their interactions with each other as members of groups or communities. The relationship between language and context is fundamental to the work of J. R. Firth (1935 , 1957a , 1957b), Michael Halliday (1971 , 1989a) and John Sinclair (2004), each of whom has made important contributions to the area of discourse analysis. Firth draws on the anthro pologist Malinowski's (1923 , 1935) notions of context of situation and context of culture to discuss this relationship, arguing that in order to understand the meaning of what a person says or writes we need to know something about the situational and cultural context in which it is located. That is, if you don't know what the people involved in a text are doing and don't understand their culture 'then you can't make sense of their text' (Martin 2001 : 151). Halliday (1971) takes the discussion further by linking context of situation with actual texts and context of culture with potential texts and the range of possibilities that are open to language users for the creation of texts. The actual choices a person makes from the options that are available to them within the particular context of culture, thus, take place within a particular context of situation, both of which influence the use of language in the text (see Hasan 2009 , Halliday 2009a , van Dijk 2011 for further discussion of the relation ship between language and context). The work of J. R. Firth has been similarly influential in the area of discourse analysis. This is reflected in the concern by discourse analysts to study language within authentic instances of use (as opposed to made-up examples) – a concern with the inseparability of meaning and form and a focus on a contextual theory of meaning (Stubbs 1996). Sinclair also argues that language should be studied in naturally occurring contexts and that the analysis of meaning should be its key focus (Carter 2004). Discourse analysis, then, is interested in 'what happens when people draw on the knowl edge they have about language . . . to do things in the world' (Johnstone 2002 : 3). It is, thus, the analysis of language in use. Discourse analysis considers the relationship between language and the contexts in which it is used and is

concerned with the description and analysis of both spoken and written interactions. Its primary purpose, as Chimombo and Roseberry (1998) argue, is to provide a deeper understanding and appreciation of texts and how they become meaningful to their users.

Discourse Analysis The discourse structure of texts

Discourse analysts are also interested in how people organize what they say in the sense of what they typically say first, and what they say next and so on in a conversation or in a piece of writing. This is something that varies across cultures and is by no means the same across languages. An email, for example, to me from a Japanese academic or a member of the administrative staff at a Japanese university may start with reference to the weather say ing immediately after Dear Professor Paltridge something like Greetings! It's such a beautiful day today here in Kyoto . I, of course, may also say this in an email to an overseas colleague but is it not a ritual requirement in English, as it is in Japanese. There are, thus, particular things we say and particular ways of ordering what we say in particular spoken and written situations and in particular languages and cultures. Mitchell (1957) was one the first researchers to examine the discourse structure of texts. He looked at the ways in which people order what they say in buying and selling interac tions. He looked at the overall structure of these kinds of texts, introducing the notion of stages into discourse analysis; that is the steps that language users go through as they carry out particular interactions. His interest was more in the ways in which interactions are organized at an overall textual level than the ways in which language is used in each of the stages of a text. Mitchell discusses how language is used as, what he calls, co-operative action and how the meaning of language lies in the situational context in which it is used and in the context of the text as a whole. If, then, I am walking along the street in Shanghai near a market and someone says to me Hello Mister, DVD , I know from the situation that I am in that they want to sell me DVDs. If I then go into a market and someone asks what seems to me to be a very high price for a shirt, I know from my experience with this kind of interaction that the price they are telling me is just a starting point in the buying and selling exchange and that I can quite easily end up buying the shirt for at least half the original price. I know from my experience how the interaction will typically start, what language will typically be used in the interaction and how the interaction will typically end. I also start to learn other typical characteristics of the interaction. For example, a person will normally only say Hello Mister, DVD (or Hello Mister, Louis Vuitton , etc.) when I am between stalls, not when I am in a stall and have started a buying and selling interaction with someone. Hasan (1989a) has continued this work into the analysis of service encounters, as has Ventola (1984 , 1987). Hasan and Ventola aim to capture obligatory and optional stages that are typical of service encounters. For example, a greeting such as Hi, how are you? is not always

obligatory at the start of a service encounter in English when someone is buy ing something at the delicatessen counter in a busy supermarket. However, a sales request such as Can I have . . . or Give me . . . etc. where you say what you want to buy is. Hasan and Ventola point out, further, that there are many possible ways in which the stages in a service encounter (and indeed many genres) can be realized in terms of language. For example, a request for service might be expressed as Could you show me . . . or Have you got . . . (etc.). The ways in which these elements are expressed will vary, further, depending on where the service encounter is taking place; that is whether it is in a supermarket, at the post office or at a travel agent etc. It will also vary according to variables such as the age of the people involved in the interaction and whether the service encounter is face-to-face or on the phone, etc. (Flowerdew 1993). There is, thus, is no neat one-to-one correspondence between the structural elements of texts and the ways in which they are expressed through language. Other researchers have also investigated recurring patterns in spoken interactions, although in a somewhat different way from Mitchell and others following in that tradi tion. Researchers working in the area known as conversation analysis have looked at how people open and close conversations and how people take turns and overlap their speech in conversations, for example. They have looked at casual conversations, chat, as well as doctor–patient consultations, psychiatric interviews and interactions in legal settings. Their interest, in particular, is in fine-grained analyses of spoken interactions such as the use of overlap, pauses, increased volume and pitch and what these reveal about how people relate to each other in what they are saying and doing with language.

Cultural ways of speaking and writing

Different cultures often have different ways of doing things through language. This is some thing that was explored by Hymes (1964) through the notion of the ethnography of com munication. Hymes' work was a reaction to the neglect, at the time, of speech in linguistic analyses and anthropological descriptions of cultures. His work was also a reaction to views of language which took little or no account of the social and cultural contexts in which lan guage occurs. In particular, he considered aspects of speech events such as who is speaking to whom, about what, for what purpose, where and when, and how these impact on how we say and do things in culture-specific settings. There are, for example, particular cultural ways of buying and selling things in differ ent cultures. How I buy my lunch at a takeaway shop in an English-speaking country is different, for example, from how I might do this in Japan. In an English-speaking country there is greater ritual use of Please and Thanks on the part of the customer in this kind of interaction than there is in Japan. How I buy something in a supermarket in an English speaking country may be more similar to how I might do this in Japan. The person at the cash register in Japan, however, will typically say much more

than the customer in this sort of situation, who may indeed say nothing. This does not mean that by saying nothing the Japanese customer is being rude. It simply means that there are culturally different ways of doing things with language in different cultures. The sequence of events I go through may be the same in both cultures, but the ways of using language in these events and other sorts of non-linguistic behaviour may differ. 6 Discourse Analysis A further example of this can be seen when companies decide to set up a braches of their business overseas. A number of years ago the Japanese department store Daimaru opened a branch in Melbourne. Each year the store had a spring sale and sent out circulars to its customers to let them know about it. It was interesting to see how differently the company wrote their promotional materials for their Japanese-speaking and their English-speaking customers. The Japanese texts commenced with 'seasonal greetings' (as in the emails above) referring to the warm spring weather and the sight of fresh flowers in the gardens whereas the English texts went straight to the point of the message, the sale that would be start ing shortly. In the Japanese texts it would have been impolite not to do this whereas in the English texts it would have been unnecessary and, indeed, may have hidden the point of the text for the English readers if they had done this.

1.2 Different views of discourse analysis

There are in fact a number of differing views on what discourse analysis actually is. Social science researchers, for example, might argue that all their work is concerned with the analysis of discourse, yet often take up the term in their own, sometimes different, ways (Fairclough 2003). Mills (1997) makes a similar observation showing how through its rela tively short history the term discourse analysis has shifted from highlighting one aspect of language usage to another, as well as being used in different ways by different researchers. Fairclough (2003) contrasts what he calls 'textually oriented discourse analysis' with approaches to discourse analysis that have more of a social theoretical orientation. He does not see these two views as mutually exclusive, however, arguing for an analysis of discourse that is both linguistic and social in its orientation. Cameron and Kulick (2003) present a similar view. They do not take these two perspectives to be incompatible with each other, arguing that the instances of language in use that are studied under a textually oriented view of discourse are still socially situated and need to be interpreted in terms of their social meanings and functions. David Crystal's (2008) analysis of Barack Obama's victory speech when he won the US presidential election is an example of textually oriented discourse analysis. One of the fea tures Crystal notes in Obama's speech is the use of parallelism , where he repeats certain grammatical structures for rhetorical effect. In the following extract from the opening lines of his speech Obama repeats 'who clauses' (highlighted below) lowering the processing load of

the speech so that listeners will focus on the content of each the clauses that follow. Crystal also shows how Obama follows the rhetorical 'rule of three' in this section of his speech in a way that mirrors the speeches of former political leaders such as Winston Churchill. If there is anyone out there who still doubts that America is a place where all things are possible, who still wonders if the dream of our founders is alive in our time, who still questions the power of our democracy, tonight is your answer. (CNNPolitics.com 2008) What is Discourse Analysis? 7 Obama also uses lists of pairs in his speech to rhetorical effect, as in: It's the answer spoken by young and old, rich and poor, Democrat and Republican, black, white, Hispanic, Asian, Native American, gay, straight, disabled and not disabled. (ibid.) Higgins' (2008) analysis of Obama's speech is an example of more socially oriented dis course analysis. Higgins traces Obama's speech back to the oratory of the ancient Greeks and Romans showing how the use of the 'tricolon' (series of threes), as in the example above, was one of Cicero's, as well as Julius Caesar's, rhetorical techniques, as in Caesar's 'Veni, vidi, vici' (I came, I saw, I conquered). In doing this, Obama recalls both the politics and traditions of ancient Athens where oratory was 'the supreme political skill, on whose mas tery power depended' (ibid., online). Williams (2009) discusses Obama's speech within the context of the political (and economic) moment of his victory, highlighting the central message of optimism in his speech captured in the repetition of the refrain 'Yes, we can'. Higgins (2008) also discusses how this 'Yes, we can' relates, intertextually, to the call-and response preaching of the American church and the power that effective preachers have on their congregations. Obama's reference in his speech to previous leaders, thus, draws on the social stock of knowledge (Luckmann 2009) he shares with his audience and their social and cultural histories. We can see, then, that discourse analysis is a view of language at the level of text. Discourse analysis is also a view of language in use; that is, how people achieve certain communicative goals through the use of language, perform certain communicative acts, participate in certain communicative events and present themselves to others. Discourse analysis considers how people manage interactions with each other, how people communicate within particular groups and societies as well as how they communicate with other groups, and with other cultures. It also focuses on how people do things beyond language, and the ideas and beliefs that they communicate as they use language.