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Applied Linguistics

Discourse Analysis

(Part One)

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Introduction

Discourse can be defined as a stretch of language in use that achieves meaning and coherence.

Discourse analysis can be defined as the use and development of theories and methods which elucidate how meaning and coherence in language use are achieved. DA is concerned not only with language, but with all elements and processes which contribute to communication.

DA and AL distinguish themselves from formal linguistics by their resolute focus upon attested language use in actual social contexts.

Within this, social theory perspectives play a crucial role: **Foucault highlights discourse as a system of power or knowledge that governs what can be said and by whom** (e.g., in medicine, only doctors' language is accepted as "truth" about illness, while patients' narratives are often dismissed — showing how institutions control discourse), while **Bourdieu stresses discourse as shaped by social position and symbolic power** (e.g., politicians' words carrying more authority than ordinary citizens saying the same words because of the authority the politician possesses). Together, these perspectives frame DA as the study of both the linguistic realization of meaning and the wider institutional and social structures that give discourse its power and significance.

Early AL DA

Early Discourse Analysis (DA) in Applied Linguistics (AL) grew from linguistic efforts in the 1950s to analyze language structures beyond the single sentence.

Key theoretical shifts in the 1970s were crucial for this development. Halliday and Hasan's (1976) work on **cohesion** (revealed linguistic links between sentences) but also highlighted the difference from **coherence**, (the perceived meaning and unity of a text). For example, "*Casualties are high. The president has resigned.*" is coherent without cohesive links, while "*Charles has a spoon. He drives it.*" is cohesive but incoherent. Simultaneously, **Hymes (1972)** argued that knowing a language requires **communicative competence**, social and psychological knowledge, not just grammatical rules.

These ideas paved the way for DA to flourish in the 1970s and 1980s. It became fundamentally linked to AL's main concern at the time: **language teaching**. DA formed the theoretical basis for **Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)**, promoting the principle that successful language

learning requires the ability to **use language to achieve meaning in communication**, not just formal knowledge of grammar.

Text, context, and discourse

In its early stages, DA work in AL saw text (the linguistic element in communication) as essentially distinct from context (the non-linguistic elements) and discourse as the two in interaction to create meaning. Context variously included consideration of factors, such as:

- The immediate situation.
- The participants and their intentions, knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, affiliations, and feelings, as well as their roles, relations, and status.
- Cultural and ideological norms.
- Surrounding language ('co-text') and evoked texts ('intertext').
- Non-linguistic behaviours like gestures and tone of voice ('paralanguage').
- Other modes of communication, such as images and music.

However, this separation of text and context has since been seen as **problematic**. The core criticism is that in actual communication, **language is inseparably bound to all other elements**.

Consequently, more recent DA work, sometimes influenced by theorists like Bakhtin, has adopted a **holistic approach that views discourse as irreducible**. In this view, discourse is not a simple sum of text plus context, but a unified whole.

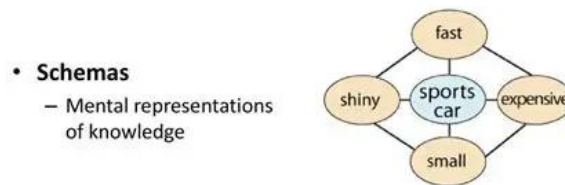
Pragmatics

Early Discourse Analysis (DA) turned to pragmatics to better understand the role of context in communication. DA began to focus on how discourse is structured by what speakers are trying to do with their words (known as speech acts) and how their intentions are recognized by others. Pragmatic principles were successfully applied to the analysis of authentic and extended communication. Explanations of speech act theory, the cooperative principle, and politeness principles became standard components of introductions to DA.

Schema theory

Another approach to context derived from psychology and artificial intelligence were the related notions of schemata. These are pre-existing mental constructs of expected sequences of events or combinations of elements which discourse participants use to interpret what is said or written.

Schema theory



Schema theory is a powerful tool in DA as it can help to explain both high level aspects of understanding such as coherence, and low level linguistic phenomena such as article choice. For example, the sentences *“The taxi was late. The driver couldn’t find our house.”* appears coherent because our knowledge about taxis (a “taxi schema”) tells us that taxis have drivers who pick people up from houses. But the sentences *“The taxi was late. The sailor couldn’t find our house.”* appears incoherent because we don’t expect a sailor to drive a taxi.

In the idea that discourse is made of text + context, a schema can be classed as context, as it is a kind of knowledge, derived from experience of the world, which we use to understand any new text.