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A Course in Applied Linguistics
M.A. in English Language and Linguistics

(Discourse Analysis)

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What is discourse analysis?

Discourse is a subject of study in various disciplines, with discourse analysis being particularly relevant in applied linguistics. Discourse analysts examine spoken or written texts, focusing on the relationship between texts and their contextual settings. Unlike formal grammarians and philosophers of language, discourse analysts analyze real texts rather than constructed examples.

When analyzing texts, discourse analysts consider the following questions:

- 1. Participant Analysis:** They examine the identities of the individuals involved in the discourse, such as the writer, reader(s), speaker(s), and listener(s). They explore the relationship between the participants and consider factors like equality, power dynamics, and differences in knowledge. These contextual factors are not typically taken into account by formal grammarians when working with isolated, out-of-context sentences.
- 2. Meaning Interpretation:** Discourse analysts explore how we understand the intended meaning of writers and speakers. They ask questions like "What does this piece of language mean in this context?" and "What is the speaker/writer trying to convey with this piece of language?" They investigate the factors that enable us to interpret the text, including the contextual information and clues within the surrounding text. In contrast, formal grammarians may focus on the meaning of a sentence independently of its context, and lexicologists may examine the meaning of individual words regardless of their context.

Discourse analysis holds a crucial position in applied linguistics because it allows applied linguists to analyze and comprehend actual language data. This includes texts written by both first and second language learners, recordings of spoken output by secondlanguage learners, and interactions between teachers and learners or among learners in educational settings. By analyzing these real-life language examples, discourse analysis assists language teachers and materials writers in evaluating language course books. It helps determine how closely these course books reflect authentic language usage and identifies necessary modifications when incorporating authentic texts into the classroom. Moreover, discourse analysis contributes to the field of language testing by providing criteria for evaluating test performances based on real language use

Approaches to discourse analysis

Overview

Discourse analysis encompasses various approaches that have been developed by scholars from different academic disciplines. However, we will focus on the approaches that are particularly relevant to applied linguistics and language education. The main contributions to the study of spoken discourse have come from **sociology**, specifically through conversational analysis. **Sociolinguistic** approaches such as the ethnography of speaking, interactional linguistics, and Labov and Waletzky's research have been influential in analyzing spoken discourse. **Philosophy** has contributed speech act theory and pragmatics, which shed light on how people interpret specific utterances. **Linguistics** has made significant contributions through the Birmingham School and systemic functional linguistics (SFL), both of which have enhanced our understanding of spoken and written discourse in English. Additionally, interdisciplinary connections between **linguistics and critical and cultural theory** have given rise to perspectives such as critical linguistics and critical discourse analysis (CDA).

Sociology: conversation analysis

Conversation analysis is a sociological method that studies the organization of everyday interactions, focusing on spoken discourse in informal contexts. It differs from mainstream sociology, which focuses on broader categories like class, gender, and age groups. Influenced by Garfinkel's ethnomethodology and Goffman's frame analysis, it focuses on fine-grained analyses, often focusing on short segments of conversation. Key questions explored include how people take turns, initiate and conclude conversations, introduce new topics, conclude old ones, and ensure smooth progress.

Turn-taking

In conversation analysis, the basic unit of speech is the "turn," which represents each instance when a speaker speaks. A turn ends when another speaker takes a turn. This concept focuses on social interaction rather than linguistic factors. In everyday conversations, interruptions and pauses between turns are minimal. Speakers can take turns when chosen by the current speaker or through self-selection. If neither of these conditions applies, the current speaker can continue. Language provides signals for speakers to indicate their desire to take the next turn, and appropriateness varies with context.

Patterns in turn-taking: adjacency pairs

In conversation analysis, one of the fundamental patterns is known as an "adjacency pair." An adjacency pair consists of two turns that mutually influence each other. Everyday examples of adjacency pairs include greeting-greeting, compliment-thanks, and apology-acceptance. Each pair consists of a first pair-part and a second pair-part.

For instance:

A: Good morning

B: Hi, good morning

A: Congratulations on the new job

B: Oh, thanks

These adjacency pairs flow smoothly and align with the cultural expectations in English-speaking contexts. Greetings elicit greetings in return, and congratulations typically prompt a thank-you. These are examples of "preferred sequences" that are commonly observed.

In conversation analysis, there are instances of "dispreferred sequences" that deviate from the expected patterns. For example:

A: Hi, how's it going?

B: Drop dead.

This response would likely be perceived as a dispreferred sequence, causing a problem for the speakers. In such cases, efforts are made to minimize damage to the participants' sense of personal worth, also known as their "face." Conversation analysts also study conversational openings and closings as well as how individuals manage the topics they want to discuss.

Linguistic approaches

1. The Birmingham School

In the 1970s, Sinclair and Coulthard recorded mother-tongue classes at the Birmingham School, which involved students answering questions, engaging in activities, or listening to the teacher. They developed a model for analyzing classroom discourse using these recordings, which organized discourse into transactional, exchanges, moves, and local micro-actions. Transactions consist of three core moves: initiating (I), responding (R), and follow-up (F). The 'IRF model', a shorthand title for the 'eliciting exchange', is a typical exchange in teacher-fronted classrooms. This research increased awareness of classroom language among language teachers and influenced the shift towards communicative language teaching. The model has been useful for analyzing language classrooms and other types of discourse, making it a valuable tool for language teachers.

2. Systemic functional linguistics

Systemic functional linguistics (SFL) and critical discourse analysis are socially oriented linguistic approaches that study the relationship between language, text, and social life. SFL focuses on the internal organization of language and its evolved functions, examining how people use language to achieve everyday social life and how social worlds are created through language. It investigates how language is structured to achieve sociocultural meanings. SFL is particularly applicable to the analysis of spoken discourse, considering the social context in which it occurs. Both approaches share the belief in the social nature of language, as conversation builds social contexts and guides and shapes them. SFL focuses on the organization of language for effective conversation.

Implications for pedagogy

Discourse Analysis in

Language Pedagogy

- Discourse analysts help in understanding language structure in different contexts, enabling precise classification of language genres and selection of relevant discourses.

- Discourse analysis aids in modeling different types of writing, such as academic papers and business letters, to explain their underlying features.

- Teacher training programs and classroom teachers can use discourse analysis models to understand teacher-learner interaction, facilitating systematic evaluation of interaction practices.

- Discourse analysis insights can help teachers evaluate their own learners' performance in classroom tasks, leading to better task design.

Conversation analysis reveals everyday talk is not disorganized, allowing systematic teaching of features like language of openings and closings, discourse markers, and common adjacency pairs.

- Discourse analysis provides descriptive information for pedagogical grammarians and lexicographers, resulting in more sensitive pedagogical grammars and learners' dictionaries.