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Discourse Analysis

Higher Studies- Ph.D.

Dividing The World of Discourse

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Dividing The World of Discourse

1.0 Introduction

Our main concern is with the implications for language teaching of a view of language that takes into account the fact that linguistic patterns exist across stretches of text. These patterns of language extend beyond the words, clauses, and sentences that have been the traditional concern of much language teaching. The view of language we take is on

1. complete spoken and written texts

2. The social and cultural contexts in which this language operates.

It is a discourse-based view of language. It contrasts markedly with the approach to language that has, until recently, characterised both mother tongues and second- or foreign-language teaching.

1.1 Speech and Writing

The first and most immediate problem for a language teacher trying to identify a cross-section of the target language in the form of written texts or spoken material for presentation to learners is just how enormous and all-pervasive everyday language use is. The amount of language produced in one day, whether in written or spoken form, by even a relatively small number of people (for example, the population of one medium-sized town) is vast. It is probably impossible to even estimate the number of words produced by such a population in a twenty-four-hour span, let alone begin to analyse so much language. And yet it is clearly important for language teachers to know as much as possible about people's day-to-day uses of language.

Syllabuses and materials are necessarily selective in what they teach and usually classify their content in some way. The more we understand about actual language use, the less difficult it becomes to select and classify. For the majority of language teachers, the most important need is a practical framework for exploiting what can be observed in people's day-to-day uses of language. Knowing how language works and how people use it is a first and indispensable step towards deciding what shall be taught and is one of the components, along with knowledge of the psychology of learning and the social and cultural contexts of learning, which feed into how we teach languages. We cannot hope to answer basic

questions about the form and content of language teaching syllabuses and materials without subjecting their raw material, the target language, to close scrutiny.

The language teaching profession traditionally divides language use into spoken and written categories. Teachers often find themselves assigned as teachers of "spoken skills" or teachers of "writing," and the syllabus may equally have spoken and written language among its major divisions.

Publishers often divide their materials up along the written and spoken divide, and coursebook titles reflect this. While this division may serve practical purposes in five vocational contexts, it also raises complex questions when examined from a descriptive viewpoint, particularly when we consider real language data. First, we must differentiate between the medium used to convey the message and the mode of language the sender uses.

Medium refers to the overall distinction between linguistic messages transmitted to their receivers via phonic or graphic means, that is, by sound or by writing, and is a basic practical division for the assembly of syllabuses and materials. It also involves us in finer distinctions of what Crystal and Davy (1969: 70) refer to as a complex medium. For instance, a message may be written but intended to be delivered as speech (e.g., a university lecture) or spoken but destined to be transmitted to its intended audience in writing (e.g., a statement at a press conference). Medium, as a general heading, alongside the recognition of the existence of complex media, already provides us with quite a variety of categorisations for the world of text and discourse. But medium, as we shall see, needs to be accompanied by consideration of an independent level of choice, that of mode. Mode refers to choices that the sender makes as to whether features normally associated with speech or writing shall be included in the message, regardless of the medium in which it is to be transmitted.

❖ The Role of Informants in Classifying Spoken and Written Modes of Language

Informants are individuals, both native and non-native speakers of English, who are tasked with analysing and tagging language extracts to determine whether the language is predominantly spoken or written in a particular mode.

1. These informants provide intuitive judgements about the linguistic features that distinguish different modes of language use.

2. Their responses help identify patterns and tendencies in language, such as the use of discourse markers (e.g., "well," "you know"), grammatical structures (e.g., contracted forms, passive voice), and lexical choices (e.g., formal vs. informal vocabulary) that are typical of spoken or written contexts.

3. The informant's ability to recognise these features, even in decontextualised extracts, demonstrates their linguistic competence and sensitivity to the nuances of language use.

4. Their judgements are used to validate and refine frameworks for classifying spoken and written modes, which are essential for language teaching and syllabus design.

By relying on the informants' intuitive sense of language, researchers can better understand how language functions in different contexts and how these insights can be applied to teaching practices.

1.2 Frameworks for classifying spoken and written modes

Overview of Classification of Spoken and Written Modes Linguists have long sought to classify spoken and written modes of language. A key aspect of this classification process is identifying specific linguistic forms (such as syntax, vocabulary, and phonology) that are present in either spoken or written language. The classification of these forms is fundamental to studies like Crystal and Davy (1969), where they analyze different types of language, such as conversational language, newspaper reports, and religious discourse, based on the presence or absence of certain linguistic features. We discuss three frameworks here for classifying spoken and written modes of language.

These frameworks differ in their methodology, focus, and criteria for classification:

1. Crystal and Davy’s Framework (1969)

• Main Features/Methodology:

- **Linguistic Forms:** Crystal and Davy examine linguistic forms (e.g., syntactic, lexical, and phonological features) to distinguish between spoken and written modes.

- **Contextual Features:** They also consider situational factors like medium (spoken or written), the relationship between participants, and modality (choices like letter, postcard, or memo).
- **Objective:** Their goal is to identify patterns in language use by isolating the situational features (such as medium, participant roles, and communication methods) and mapping these onto specific linguistic forms.
- **Relevance:** This framework helps in classifying speech and writing based on formality, interaction style, and medium. It directly applies to language teaching by helping educators identify linguistic forms suitable for specific communicative contexts (e.g., formal letters, informal conversations, etc.).

2. Chafe's Functional Approach (1982)

- Main Features/Methodology:
- **Functional Categories:** Chafe classifies language as explicit vs. implicit and context-free vs. context-dependent.
- Explicit language (typically written) provides clear, direct references that do not rely heavily on the surrounding context.
- Implicit language (typically spoken) relies more on the immediate context for meaning and often leaves information unstated.
- **Context Dependence:** Chafe argues that spoken language is more context dependent, relying on shared understanding between participants, whereas written language can be interpreted more independently of the context.
- **Relevance:** This framework is relevant for EFL teaching because it helps distinguish how learners should adapt their language depending on whether they are speaking (more contextual and implicit) or writing (more explicit and context-free). It can also inform how language is taught in various genres and contexts.

3. Biber and Finegan's Framework (1989)

• Main Features/Methodology:

- Three Sets of Oppositions: Biber and Finegan use three main oppositions to classify spoken vs. written language:

  1. Informational vs. Involved Production: Informational language focuses on delivering facts (common in writing), while involved production is more engaging and personal (common in speech).

2. Elaborated vs. Situation-dependent Reference: Written language tends to have more elaborate references (clear and context-independent), whereas spoken language relies more on situation-dependent references (relying on the immediate context).

3. Abstract vs. Non-abstract Style: Written texts (especially formal ones) tend to use abstract language, while spoken language is more concrete and informal.

- Cluster Analysis: They use large-scale computer analysis to identify tendencies and patterns in language use across different genres and discourse types.
- Relevance: This framework is especially useful for analysing how language use varies between different types of discourse (e.g., academic versus casual). It has serious consequences for EFL instruction, as it helps identify language features that learners can practice depending on the context (e.g., academic writing requires more elaborated and abstract language, while everyday speech is more involved and situation-dependent).
- The frameworks presented by Crystal and Davy, Chafe, and Biber and Finegan offer helpful details about the classification of spoken and written language modes. These models highlight the dynamic nature of language and its adaptability across different contexts. However, it is important to recognise the complexities of language classification. The boundaries between spoken and written modes are not always clear-cut. Instead, classifications should be viewed as tendencies based on situational context, genre, and the language's purpose.

Language as Discourse: Perspectives for Language Teaching
Michael McCarthy and Ronald Carter