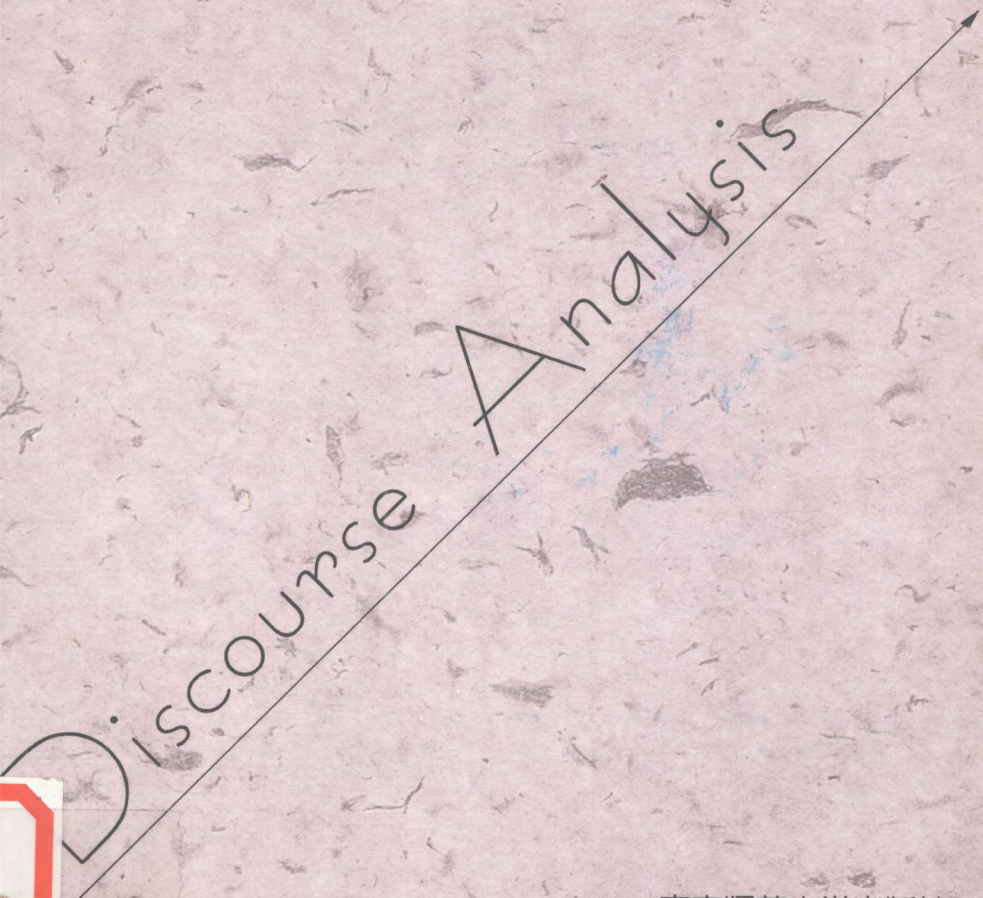
# DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

丁言仁 著

# 语篇分析

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# Preface

This book is an introduction to basic concepts and theories of discourse analysis. Although many graduate English programs in China offer the course Discourse Analysis, the course either has no textbook or uses textbooks published overseas that do not always suit the needs of the participants in these programs. This volume, therefore, attempts to help out when students of the English language are studying discourse analysis in a Chinese context.

The book is designed for graduate students of applied linguistics, English teachers and teacher trainees who are enrolled in various graduate programs in China. In addition to introducing concepts and theories, it emphasizes "doing" discourse analysis both in research and in language use. It applies our understanding of discourse to the practice of learning and teaching the English language. I hope that this book will also be of help to readers who would like to improve their proficiency and writing skills.

I am indebted to Barbara Penny, my former colleague from Nanjing University and the Amity Foundation, who patiently read my manuscript and offered many invaluable comments and suggestions although she is now working in a city far away from Nanjing.

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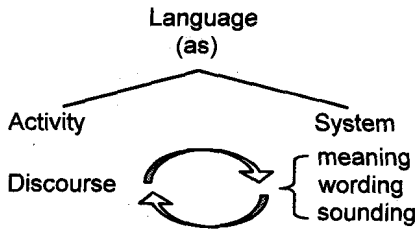
# Chapter One
# Discourse and Situation

This first chapter will present a basic framework for the study of discourse. We will discuss our dual perspective on language, analyze the relationship between language and situation and look at the way we analyze situation and analyze functions of language use. Since these topics touch upon some of the fundamental issues in the study of language and discourse, we think a quick overview of these issues is a good place to start our inquiry. We will return to these issues from time to time in later chapters.

## 1.1 Language as System and as Activity

We may look at language from two different perspectives. We may look at it as **system**. A vocabulary list or a dictionary deals with language as system. That is, it attempts to describe the whole of language, not just little bits of it. A foreign language class teaches us bits and pieces, but its ultimate goal is to help us learn the entire language. When we say that so and so speaks good French, we mean she is in command of the whole of the system, not just able to say "Comment allez-vous?" and "Au revoir."

We may also look at language as **activity**. In our everyday life, we do not use the whole of language. Rather, we use bits and pieces. An essay you write might have eight pages, but it is still bits and pieces of a language and could never be compared to a whole dictionary. If, on your way to class, you bump into a friend and you greet each other with "Hi" and hurry off, that brief exchange of "Hi" is also an instance of language use, one bit of the English language.



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The above is a diagram that shows the distinction between language as system and language as activity. As shown in this diagram, if we look at language as system, we are actually dealing with a system of many systems. These systems operate on three layers. "Meaning" refers to the semantic systems of language, "wording" the lexicogrammatical systems (i.e., systems of syntax and morphology) and "sounding" the phonological systems. For instance, all the personal pronouns in English make up the personal pronoun system on the "wording" level. In the case of written language, we are not dealing with "sounding"; instead, we have "signing," referring to the graphological or orthographical systems.

The two curved arrows in the diagram represent the interaction between activity and system. Such interaction takes place in real life all the time. When we are engaged in language activities, we draw on our knowledge of language systems. At the same time, we also pick up new things and incorporate them into our linguistic knowledge. They are stored up for future use. Just recall, for instance, how you came to be able to use an expression like "Long time no see." As learners of English, we often experience such movement from practice to knowledge and back to practice again.

Notice that except for animal language, all language has the three strata, meaning, wording and sounding (or signing). In language use, meaning, i.e., what we want to mean, has to be realized in wording; that is, it has to be put in words according to rules of grammar. Wording, in turn, has to be realized in sounding; that is, it has to be uttered before the listener can hear anything. If you are hungry and are ordering a bowl of noodles in a fast food restaurant, you will go through these three steps very quickly before you get the noodles.

Whatever we do to (or with) other people, gazing, whistling, smiling, chatting, lecturing, writing or even fist fighting, we are engaged in social interaction that usually (although not always) involves language use. We use the term **discourse** to refer to the language activity in social interaction. A discourse is always **coherent**; that is, its participants perceive the stretch of language in use as having purpose, meaning and connection. **Discourse analysis** is the study and explanation of the quality of coherence in a discourse. It is the study of how language users perceive a stretch of language as a meaningful whole.

We use the term **text** to refer to the linguistic forms of discourse, forms whose meaning does not vary with context. Saying "You are very fast" to a friend who has won the first place in a marathon and saying it to another friend who is always the last to finish his lunch are very different discourses, but the texts, if we ignore all else, are the same. While discourse is social interaction in which language is used, text is a record of the language used in such social interaction. Text analysis is a very important part of discourse analysis.

Discourse always involves more than one person. Our daily life consists in zillions of instances of such person-to-person encounters. Even when writing an essay in a room by yourself, you have to project the readers' reaction to what you put down on paper or on the computer screen. This is a discourse activity. When writing your diary, you pretend that you are two people; that is, you imagine what another you will want to read, and you write accordingly. This is again a discourse activity.

Notice that traditional linguistics only includes semantics, syntax, morphology, phonology and other branches that deal with language as systems. Yet we can make a case for saying that when we learn our mother tongue or learn a second language, our knowledge of these systems only grows in their use, i.e., in our discourse practice. System begins with activity. It is unfortunate that discourse did not catch the linguist's attention until very recently.

**Exercise 1.1**: The baby babbles, and the mother can usually tell the meaning of different kinds of babbling. Does this kind of "language" have lexicogrammar? How does the baby develop this "language"? How does the mother learn to understand this "language" even though she herself does not speak it? Lastly, how does the young child gradually get rid of this "proto-language" and pick up the adult language? Perhaps no one in the world has full answers to these questions, but they are worth bearing in mind when you study discourse. You may interview some mothers. And you may also observe the speech of some young children. Pay attention to the "grammar" of their utterances and also to what objectives they expect to achieve by making those utterances.

## 1.2 Language Use with Purpose and Function

Whenever we use language, we use it for some purpose; we want the person we talk to (or write to) to do something, to say something and/or to think about something. As a result, the language we use has functions. Discourse is language use that can be seen as **a unified, meaningful whole, with distinct functions and purposes**. It is a communicative act. The street sign "STOP" is a discourse. So is a movie, a letter, a novel, a phone call, or a quarrel in the vegetable market. If you look up the word "discourse" in your dictionary, you find:

> Connected language in speech or writing

This entry is a discourse. Its function is to tell you what the word "discourse" means. Other entries have different functions and, therefore, are not part of this discourse. For instance, the entry for "discouragement" occurs immediately before "discourse" but has nothing to do with it. Boundaries of discourse are usually marked by change in participants or in topic. A saleswoman, immediately after a customer leaves, turns to you by asking: "May I help you?" She has finished one discourse and started another.

When we learn a foreign language, we learn its pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary. What is most important, however, is to learn how this language is used in real life situations. Discourse analysis is the analysis of language in use. Here, we are not analyzing language in terms of sentences or clauses; rather, we are analyzing it in terms of its function in real life. We are interested in what purpose language serves and how it serves this purpose.

Consider the following:

A: Excuse me. Where is the nearest subway station?
B: Two blocks that way.
A: Thank you.
B: You're welcome.

A (answer the phone): Hello!
B: Hi, may I speak to Kathy, please?
A: You must have got a wrong number.
B: Oh, I'm sorry.
A: That's OK.

Either of these two exchanges is a unified, meaningful whole; the utterances made by A and B clearly go together, with clear functions. By contrast, few people will consider the following exchange a discourse:

A: He lost his socks.
B: Nice day, isn't it?
A: I got a headache.
B: My mother speaks French.
A: I still have my shoes.

The utterances do not go together. Perhaps except in a mental institution, we never hear people talk like this. We cannot make out the meaning, cannot see the purpose of making any of the utterances and, therefore, will not see the "exchange" as unified or meaningful.

**Exercise 1.2**: By definition, there are clear differences between what is discourse and what is not. In reality, is there always a clear dividing line between the two? Find some simple examples of discourse and non-discourse. What can you find in writings by an eight-year-old schoolchild who has just started to learn to write? What about an English essay by a Chinese high school student? Why do you find it difficult to understand?

## 1.3 Language in Situation

Whenever language is used, it is used in context. As context varies, so does the language. Context constrains our behavior, including our language use. We may think that this is easy to understand and that if a person grew up in Suzhou, she naturally speaks Suzhou dialect but does not understand Xiamen dialect. This is true, but context also constrains language in ways we are not always aware of. For instance, the way you talk to your parents differs from the way you talk to our university president. The way you present a conference paper differs from the way you scold a boy who has just released the air from the tire of your parked bicycle.

Language, however, is not a passive plaything. Notice that when you scold the boy, your words create a context that forces him to say "Sorry" or to run away. Similarly, if your mother keeps reminding you not to talk to a stranger when alone at night, you may make her quiet for a while by saying: "Mom, you have said this a hundred times." You are

reminding her of the fact that you are already an adult. By saying this, you are altering the context. Your verbal behavior actually redefines the context. In a conversation between two people, each utterance is at once constrained by previous utterances and constrains the upcoming utterances. Linguists call this phenomenon **mutual contextualization**. To study this relationship of mutual definition between language and context, and to study how discourse functions in situation, we must analyze the context in which language is used.

The understanding of mutual contextualization is important in the study of discourse. Without understanding the situation, we can hardly interpret language. For instance, the following utterance

You are your father's son.

seems to state the obvious. However, its meaning becomes clear as soon as we put it back into its context, as in

Host: Do you want coffee or tea?
Guest: Coffee, please.
Host: Oh, yes. You are your father's son.

We not only know the meaning, but also know the fact that the father of the guest is a coffee drinker and is probably an old friend of the host. Situation also affects our interpretation of language. Consider the following,

The baby cried. Mummy picked it up.

Here, we naturally interpret "it" as referring to the baby. However, if we change the passage a little and have

The baby cried. He didn't like the new pacifier. Mummy picked it up.

Now, as we see it, the mummy picked up the pacifier.

Notice that in the last example, situation itself is represented in language. We change the situation by adding a new sentence "He didn't like the new pacifier." This shows that language itself is often part of the context that shapes our interpretation of discourse. It is a case of interplay between language and situation. When we speak of situation, we are not only referring to the physical settings. Things included in situation can be physical or non-physical, linguistic or non-linguistic. They can also be

what goes on in our mind when we use language. Language use, therefore, is tied into its situation.

The relationship between language and situation deserves our attention. We should never underestimate the importance of the context of situation in the interpretation of language use, but at the same time, we should recognize that features relevant to language use in the situation can be abstract and remote. A technical discussion among civil engineers, for instance, may take place in a meeting room or in the office of one engineer, but which room they sit in or what furniture is in that room often does not matter very much. The things that matter to the discussion, rather, are their training and experience, the project they are working on and the problems they encounter. These things, which are derivable from their language use, make up the context of situation. Engagement in discourse is often like watching a movie: no matter which theater we sit in, we live through a world created by the movie itself although ultimately, in order for us to live through this world, the movie director has to base the movie on reality. The same happens when we read a novel, participate in a political discussion or listen to a lecture. Language use creates context just as much as context creates language use.

**Exercise 1.3**: From the following exchange:

A: That place is dangerous. Are you sure you want to go there?
B: Yeah, I'm from Chicago.

what can you learn about Chicago? In what context might this exchange take place? This question can be asked in a different way: what knowledge does B assume A to have before he can say, "I'm from Chicago"? Is it likely that B would say the same words and mean the same thing when he talks to his four-year-old daughter? Why? In what way is B's answer constrained by context? In what way is it constraining context (what could A say)?

**Exercise 1.4**: We have looked at the following dialogue between two people on the street:

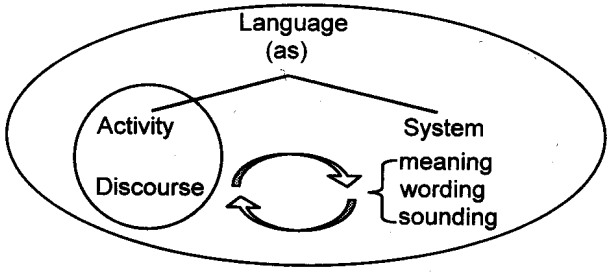
A: Excuse me. Where is the nearest subway station?
B: Two blocks that way.

A: Thank you.
B: You're welcome.

In what way can we say that one person's utterance provides context for the other's? Would it sound odd if, for instance, A did not say "Thank you" or B did not say "You're welcome"?

## 1.4 Analyzing the Context of Situation

The following diagram is a modified version of the one we have seen in Section 1 of this Chapter. The two circles represent two kinds of social context for language use. The inner circle consists of immediate social circumstances in which discourse takes place, and we call these circumstances the **generic situation**. The outer circle consists of rather stable social circumstances which influence how we choose to use a language or dialect, and we call them the **community context**. The generic situation is relatively transient; it changes when we do different things or talk to different people. The community context, in contrast, is relatively permanent; it does not change as long as we use one language, say, Chinese.




The community context includes the following variations:

**Geographical variation**. This is the variation that we call "dialect" in our everyday language. As you travel by train, you can tell that at each station, the speech of the local people changes a little. In fact, even when we use the word "dialect," we may lump together many local dialects. If we meet a group of people from Sichuan, we will say that they speak Sichuan dialect but ignore the fact that they came from different cities of Sichuan and that in each city the speech is a little different.

**Temporal variation**. This is less noticeable than geographical variation, but if you listen carefully, you can tell the difference in speech between you and your grandmother, especially in the use of words. Mark Twain never learned the word "hippie" or "yuppie." Neither did Tom Sawyer or Huckleberry Finn ever use the words "television," "internet" or "homepage."

**Socio-economic variation**. A well-known example is how speech varies between the British Parliament and London's Lower East Side. By listening to a person's speech, we can often tell whether this person is a farmer or a university professor; the difference is known as socio-economical.

**Individual variation**. There are others factors that make us who we are, and these factors, for example age, sex, and the articulatory make-up of our mouth and throat, also affect the way we talk. The resulting individual variation involves more than just voice qualities. For instance, many cultures have words and expressions which women cannot use as freely as men can.

Our social being, e.g., the place and the time period in which we live and the professions we and our parents hold, determines the way we speak, and in turn, the way we speak identifies our background, i.e., who we are. This is why some linguists say: it's not you who speak language, but language that speaks you.

The community context is related to **varieties of language distinguished according to user**. That is, it is related to features that vary from user to user, but not much within the same user. You know many expressions in your native dialect whereas your classmates may not. These expressions help separate speakers of your dialect from non-speakers. The generic situation, by contrast, is related to **varieties of language distinguished according to use**. We call these varieties **registers**. Different generic situations call for the use of different registers.

The generic situation contains three components that affect the way we speak, namely, field, tenor and mode.