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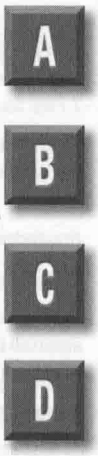
DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

A resource book for students

Rodney H. Jones

DISCOURSE ANALYSIS



A resource book for students

RODNEY JONES

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Section A

INTRODUCTION

KEY TOPICS IN THE STUDY OF DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

A1 WHAT IS DISCOURSE ANALYSIS?

Our first step in the study of discourse analysis has to be figuring out exactly what we mean by **discourse** and why it is so important to learn how to analyse it.

In one sense we can say that discourse analysis is the study of language. Many people would define discourse analysis as a sub-field of linguistics, which is the scientific study of language. Linguistics has many sub-fields, each of which looks at a different aspect of language. **Phonology** is the study of the sounds of languages and how people put them together to form words. **Grammar** is the study of how words are put together to form sentences and spoken utterances. And **discourse analysis** is the study of the ways sentences and utterances are put together to make texts and interactions and how those texts and interactions fit into our social world.

But discourse analysis is not *just* the study of language. It is a way of looking at language that focuses on how people use it in real life to do things such as joke and argue and persuade and flirt, and to show that they are certain kinds of people or belong to certain groups. This way of looking at language is based on four main assumptions. They are:

1 *Language is ambiguous.* What things mean is never absolutely clear. All communication involves interpreting what other people mean and what they are trying to do.
2 *Language is always 'in the world'.* That is, what language means is always a matter of where and when it is used and what it is used to do.
3 *The way we use language is inseparable from who we are and the different social groups to which we belong.* We use language to display different kinds of social identities and to show that we belong to different groups.
4 *Language is never used all by itself.* It is always combined with other things such as our tone of voice, facial expressions and gestures when we speak, and the fonts, layout and graphics we use in written texts. What language means and what we can do with it is often a matter of how it is combined with these other things.

The ambiguity of language

Everyone has had the experience of puzzling over what someone – a lover or a parent or a friend – 'really meant' by what he or she said. In fact, nearly all communication contains some elements of meaning that are not expressed directly by the words that are spoken or written. Even when we think we are expressing ourselves clearly and directly, we may not be. For example, you may want to borrow a pen from someone and express this desire with the question, 'Do you have a pen?' Strictly speaking, though, this question does not directly communicate that you need a pen. It only asks if the other person is in possession of one. In order to understand this question as a request, the other person needs to undertake a process of 'figuring out' what you meant, a process which in this case may be largely unconscious and automatic, but which is, all the same, a process of interpretation.

So, we can take as a starting point for our study of discourse analysis the fact that *people don't always say what they mean, and people don't always mean what they say*. This is not because people are trying to trick or deceive each other (though sometimes they are), but because language is, by its very nature, ambiguous. To say exactly what we mean all the time would be impossible: first, because as poets, lovers and even lawyers know, language is an imperfect tool for the precise expression of many things we think and feel; and second, because whenever we communicate we always mean to communicate more than just one thing. When you ask your friend if he or she has a pen, for example, you mean to communicate not just that you need a pen but also that you do not wish to impose on your friend or that you feel a bit shy about borrowing a pen, which is one of the reasons why you approach the whole business of requesting indirectly by asking if they have a pen, even when you know very well that they have one.

Language in the world

One of the most important ways we understand what people mean when they communicate is by making reference to the social context within which they are speaking or writing. The meaning of an utterance can change dramatically depending on who is saying it, when and where it is said, and to whom it is said. If a teacher asks a student who is about to take an examination the same question we discussed above, 'Do you have a pen?' it is rather unlikely that this is a request or that the teacher is a bit shy about communicating with the student. Rather, this utterance is probably designed to make sure that the student has the proper tool to take the examination or to inform the student that a pen (rather than a pencil) must be used.

In other words, when we speak of discourse, we are always speaking of language that is in some way *situated*. Language is always situated in at least four ways. First, language is situated within the material world, and where we encounter it, whether it be on a shop sign or in a textbook or on a particular website will contribute to the way we interpret it. Second, language is situated within relationships; one of the main ways we understand what people mean when they speak or write is by referring to who they are, how well we know them and whether or not they have some kind of power over us. Third, language is situated in history, that is, in relation to what happened before and what we expect to happen afterwards. Finally, language is situated in relation to other language – utterances and texts always respond to or refer to other utterances and texts; that is, everything that we say or write is situated in a kind of network of discourse.

Language and social identity

Not only is discourse situated partly by who says (or writes) what to whom, but people – the 'whos' and the 'whoms' who say or write these things – are also situated by discourse. What I mean by this is that whenever people speak or write, they are, through their discourse, somehow demonstrating who they are and what their relationship is to other people. They are enacting their identities.

The important thing about such identities is that they are multiple and fluid rather than singular and fixed. The identity I enact at the dance club on Friday night is not the same identity I enact at the office on Monday morning. The reason for this is not that I change my personality in any fundamental way, but rather that I change the way I use language.

Language and other modes

Changing the way I use language when I enact the identity of a dance club diva or a yoga teacher or a university professor, of course, is not enough to fully enact these identities. I also have to dress in certain ways, act in certain ways and hang out in certain places with certain people. In other words, language alone cannot achieve all the things I need to do to be a certain kind of person. I always have to combine that language with other things such as fashion, gestures and the handling of various kinds of objects.

Partially because of its roots in linguistics, discourse analysts used to focus almost exclusively on written or spoken language. Now, people are increasingly realising not just that we communicate in a lot of ways that do not involve language, but that in order to understand what people mean when they use language, we need to pay attention to the way it is combined with other communicative **modes** such as pictures, gestures, music and the layout of furniture.

So what good is discourse analysis?

Given these four principles, we can begin to understand some of the reasons why learning how to analyse discourse might be useful. The chief reason is that we *already* engage in discourse analysis all the time when we try to figure out what people mean by what they say and when we try to express our multiple and complicated meanings to them. Much of what you learn in this book will be about making processes that already take place beneath the surface of your consciousness more explicit. But what is the point of that, you might ask, if all of this communication and interpretation is going on so smoothly without us having to attend to it? The fact is, however, it is not. None of us is immune to misunderstandings, to offending people by saying the wrong thing, to struggling to get our message across, or to being taken in by someone who is trying somehow to cheat us. Hopefully, by understanding how discourse works, we will be able to understand people better and communicate more effectively.

Studying discourse analysis, however, can teach you more than that. Since the way we use discourse is tied up with our social identities and our social relationships, discourse analysis can help us to understand how the societies in which we live are put together and how they are maintained through our day-to-day activities of speaking, writing and making use of other modes of communication. It can help us to understand why people interact with one another the way they do and how they exert power and influence over one another. It can help us to understand how people view reality differently and why they view it that way. The study of discourse analysis, then, is not

A1

just the study of how we use language. It is also indirectly the study of politics, power, psychology, romance and a whole lot of other things.

Look deeper into why people don't say what they mean or mean what they say online.

TEXTS AND TEXTURE

A2

Discourse analysts analyse 'texts' and 'conversations'. But what is a 'text' and what is a 'conversation'? What distinguishes texts and conversations from random collections of sentences and utterances? These are the questions taken up in this section. For now we will mostly be considering written texts. Conversations will be dealt with in later units.

Consider the following list of words:

- ❑ milk
- ❑ spaghetti
- ❑ tomatoes
- ❑ rocket
- ❑ light bulbs.

You might look at this list and conclude that this is not a text for the simple reason that it 'makes no sense' to you – that it has no **meaning**. According to the linguist M.A.K. Halliday, meaning is the most important thing that makes a text a text; it has to *make sense*. A text, in his view, is everything that is meaningful in a particular situation. And the basis for *meaning* is *choice* (Halliday, 1978: 137). Whenever I choose one thing rather than another from a set of alternatives (yes or no, up or down, red or green), I am making meaning. This focus on meaning, in fact, is one of the main things that distinguishes Halliday's brand of linguistics from that of other linguists who are concerned chiefly with linguistic *forms*. Historically, the study of linguistics, he points out (1994: xiv), first involved studying the way the language was put together (syntax and morphology) *followed by* the study of meaning. In his view, however, the reverse approach is more useful. As he puts it, 'A language is . . . *a system of meanings*, accompanied by forms through which the meanings can be expressed' [emphasis mine].

So one way you can begin to make sense of the list of words above is to consider them as a series of choices. In other words, I wrote 'milk' instead of 'juice' and 'spaghetti' instead of 'linguini'. There must be some reason for this. You will still probably not be able to recognise this as a text because you do not have any understanding of what motivated these choices (why I wrote down these particular words) and the relationship between one set of choices (e.g. 'milk' vs. 'juice') and another.

It is these two pieces of missing information – the *context* of these choices and the *relationships* between them – which form the basis for what is known as **texture** – that quality that makes a particular set of words or sentences a *text* rather than a random

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