Discourse Analysis

The Sociolinguistic Analysis of Natural Language

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Editor's Preface

Michael Stubbs is an author who has always believed that sociolinguistics should be about language as it is used in everyday life, in conversational situations, by real people. He is also a linguist who has been more concerned than most that the results of linguistic research should be brought to the attention of those involved in the world of education. This book illustrates very clearly both these concerns. Much of the data on which it is based have been obtained by Stubbs himself in genuine, real-life situations; and the theoretical issues debated are accompanied by discussion of their practical implications. The book is one of the very first attempts to give theoretical coherence to a relatively new and hitherto somewhat diffuse and anecdotal field. And, though written from a predominantly linguistic perspective, it also synthesizes, as a result of Stubbs' sensitivity towards and knowledge of these fields, points of view from areas such as sociology and anthropology which have a bearing on the way in which language is used in conversational and other forms of discourse. It is appropriate that a book in this field should look at both language and society: *Discourse Analysis* sheds linguistic light on social process and, through its informed interactional perspective, also advances our understanding of the use of structure of language.

PETER TRUDGILL

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Another major debt is to Margaret Berry, Reader in English Language at the University of Nottingham, who has commented in great detail on drafts of the whole book. She has made so many detailed suggestions, in over a hundred pages of notes, that it would be impossible to acknowledge them individually. I have plundered her notes to an extent that verges on co-authorship. In this way, however, she reserves the right to disagree with me in those places where I have not had the good sense to follow her suggestions. I am very grateful for all her clear and sensible criticisms.

I am also grateful to Margaret Deuchar, Lesley Milroy, Mike McTear, Peter Trudgill, and Henry Widdowson for detailed comments on draft chapters, and to Freda Duckitt and Norma Hazzledine for transforming muddles of typing and handwriting into connected text.

Some of the chapters in this book are revised versions of articles previously published elsewhere, and I am grateful to the publishers for permission to use the material here. Chapter 3 is based on an article first published in M. Stubbs and S. Delamont, eds., *Explorations in Classroom Observation*, John Wiley, 1976. Chapter 7 is based on an article first published in M. Coulthard and M. Montgomery, eds., *Studies in Discourse Analysis*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981. Material in chapter 9 was also first reported by M. Coulthard in chapter 1 of *Studies in Discourse Analysis*. And chapter 10 is based on an article first published in R. Carter and D. Burton, eds., *Literary Text and Language Study*, Edward Arnold, 1982.

Preliminary versions of other chapters were previously circulated in mimeo. Chapter 2 is based on an article co-authored with Deirdre Burton in the *MALS Journal*, Summer 1975. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 are

based on an article in the *Belfast Working Papers in Language and Linguistics*, 5, 1981. Material in chapters 8 and 9 is based on sections of *Working Papers in Discourse Analysis*, 5, 1973, English Language Research, University of Birmingham; this research was funded by the Social Science Research Council. Chapter 11 is based on an article in C. Adelman, ed., *Uttering, Muttering*, Mimeo, Bulmershe College of Higher Education, 1976.

In all cases, the material has been extensively rewritten.

Notational Conventions

Single quotation marks ‘ ’
for quotations from other authors.

Double quotation marks “ ”
for meanings and propositions.

Italics
for short linguistic forms cited in the text.
(Longer forms cited on separate numbered lines have not been italicized.)

Asterisk *
(a) for ungrammatical or semantically anomalous forms;
(b) for forms which are well-formed in isolation, but which create ill-formed discourse in context.

Round brackets ( )
(a) for optional elements of structure;
(b) for comments in transcripts;
(c) for pauses in transcripts, e.g. (2): pause of two seconds;
(d) empty brackets indicate inaudible section on transcript.

Square brackets [ ]
(a) for narrow phonetic transcriptions;
(b) for exchange boundaries (see chapter 7, section 3).

Slanting brackets / /
for broad transcriptions.

$\left\{\begin{matrix} A \\ B \end{matrix}\right.$
system, choose A or B.

Curly brace {

simultaneous choice.

$$\left\{\begin{matrix}\{\begin{matrix}A\\B\end{matrix}\\\{\begin{matrix}C\\D\end{matrix}\end{matrix}\right.$$

choose A or B, and C or D.

Contents

PART ONE INTRODUCTION

1

Discourse Analysis: A Programmatic Introduction

The term *discourse analysis* is very ambiguous. I will use it in this book to refer mainly to the linguistic analysis of naturally occurring connected spoken or written discourse. Roughly speaking, it refers to attempts to study the organization of language above the sentence or above the clause, and therefore to study larger linguistic units, such as conversational exchanges or written texts. It follows that discourse analysis is also concerned with language in use in social contexts, and in particular with interaction or dialogue between speakers. Since the term *discourse analysis* is very ambiguous, I will comment in more detail on this introductory definition towards the end of this chapter. (See section 5.)

1 *Language, action, knowledge and situation*

Much of the fascination of discourse analysis comes from the realization that language, action and knowledge are inseparable. The most essential insight, discussed by J. L. Austin in his 1955 lectures at Harvard University, is that utterances are actions (Austin, 1962). Some actions can be performed only through language (for example, apologizing), whilst others can be performed either verbally or non-verbally (for example, threatening). In addition, as soon as we start to study how language is used in social interaction, it becomes clear that communication is impossible without shared knowledge and assumptions between speakers and hearers.

It follows also that language and situation are inseparable. There is no deterministic relationship, of course, except in highly ritualized situations. In certain games, ceremonies and formal rituals, actual forms of words may be laid down as part of the proceedings, but most everyday uses of language are much more flexible. Given a social situation such as a 'small village shop', it is possible to predict a great deal about the content, functions and style of language used there.

Much of the language will be either local gossip or transactional, concerned with buying and selling. However, I have recently visited a local village shop to perform other speech acts: to *complain* about unsatisfactory newspaper deliveries, and to *ask directions* to a local street. Nevertheless, we often know what kind of language to expect in different situations; and, conversely, given a fragment of language, we can often reconstruct in some detail the social situation which produced it. An easy demonstration of this is to turn the knob on a radio to tune in to different programmes. It usually takes only a few seconds to identify whether we are listening to a sermon, sports commentary, quiz programme, news broadcast, interview, disc jockey, play, or to a programme for young children or school pupils, or whatever. The identifying features include phonology, lexis, syntax and paralinguistic features, such as speed and rhythm. Forms vary according to function: according to the speech event (sermon versus lecture), the speech act (informing versus questioning) and the intended addressee (child versus adult), as well as other factors.

Furthermore, situations can be altered or created by using language in different ways, for example, by selecting the speech act of whispering sweet nothings, rather than nagging, carping, complaining or accusing. Any choice of words creates a mini-world or universe of discourse, and makes predictions about what is also likely to occur in the same context. For example, did the words *nagging* and *carping* earlier in this paragraph imply to you a woman speaker, or can men also nag?

It is obvious enough in a commonsense way, of course, that much language is not to be taken literally, that language is used to perform actions, and that different social situations produce different language. I recently witnessed the aftermath of a minor traffic accident, in which a van ran into two parked cars. It was dark, and the van-driver claimed he had been blinded by oncoming headlights. The two parked cars both belonged to the same man, who was, understandably, annoyed. He questioned whether the van-driver had been drinking, and said that, if the driver did not produce a better excuse for the accident, he would call the police, saying in a paradoxical, self-referential way:

1.1 That's not a threat, it's just a fact.

It was, of course, a threat; and some of the language he later used to perform speech acts such as questioning, complaining and swearing, was also produced rather directly by the situation, and therefore rather predictable. This language was, however, certainly very dif-

ferent from the language he later used to report the accident to his insurance company. The speech acts performed would certainly have been different (for example, reporting and requesting payment, rather than complaining). And the linguistic forms would have been appropriate to a formal written report, rather than to spoken interaction.

Such a view of language as action in context was put forward by Malinowski in the 1920s (Malinowski, 1923), but has not been central to much recent linguistics. (In chapter 8 I discuss other literature on speech acts and provide a more detailed definition of this concept.)

2 *The impossibility of discourse analysis?*

Such traditional and commonsense insights into the relations between language, action, knowledge and situation mean, of course, that discourse analysis is very difficult. We seem to be dealing with some kind of theory of social action. We certainly cannot restrict our view of meaning and information to matters of logic as many linguists have tried to do. We are not, for example, simply dealing with the truth values of sentences: whether statements are true or false. This is evident, since we often accept as appropriate in everyday conversation utterances which logic would reject as tautological or contradictory. Here are two simple examples I overheard recently in conversation, and which passed unremarked:

1.2 It may rain, or then again it may not.
1.3 It often does, but nine times out of ten it doesn't.

In other words, if we start looking at the everyday use of language, we seem to be involved in different logics, and what is ill-formed from a logical point of view, may be quite normal in conversation, myth or science fiction, which imply different universes of beliefs and different background assumptions.

It may be an overstatement to claim that different logics are involved. A more careful formulation might be that several different factors all interact to determine the acceptability or appropriateness of utterances used in different social contexts: not only their logical or propositional structure, or their truth value, but also knowledge of the rhetorical functions which the utterance may be serving in an argument or casual social conversation. We require knowledge, therefore, of what speech act is being performed in what speech event. It

is because of this complexity in judging acceptability or appropriateness that linguists have often tried to restrict their judgements to grammaticality, or to what seem more straightforward semantic judgements of synonymy (or paraphrase), contradiction, logical entailment, and the like.

However, meaning and truth are not independent of use. Even the truth of a sentence is often dependent on how it is used as an utterance. For example:

1.4 Italy is shaped like a boot and France is hexagonal.

is true in a sense, for certain mnemonic purposes, which might be satisfactory for schoolboys, but not for geographers or tour-operators. Truth conditions are not only a question of correspondence between a sentence and the state of the world, but also of different kinds of appropriateness (cf. Austin, 1958: 12).

Furthermore, the concept of truth is in any case applicable only to a narrow range of sentences. Very briefly, only statements can be true or false. But truth or falsity are not applicable to questions, directives, expletives, promises, counterfactuals (e.g. *If Harry was more intelligent, he wouldn't have married Susan*), and other utterances which express probabilities, beliefs or intentions. As well as a view of meaning which deals with truth conditions, we therefore also require to consider the speech acts performed by utterances.

An immediate problem is, then, the depth of indirection which is often involved: the distance from surface linguistic forms to underlying social meanings, from utterances to directives, hints and challenges. Examples of indirect speech acts are very common. For example, a speaker might say:

1.5 Your glass is empty.

And this might mean:

1.6 "I'm offering to buy you a drink."

However, some utterances can be much more indirect. I was in a hospital recently and overheard a consultant surgeon say to a patient:

1.7 Right – a little tiny hole and a fishing expedition – is that it?

What he meant was something like:

1.8 "I am going to operate on you and remove your appendix."

The choice of the very indirect reference was presumably also