

# DISCOURSE

# AND CULTURE

From discourse analysis to cultural discourse studies

Shi Xu (施旭)

话语与文化



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## Preface

In the past twenty or so years of my academic life, I have published numerous scholarly writings in English; they are varied in genre, topic, approach, and cultural context; and they exist in various forms and outlets. An important reason behind the present volume, therefore, is to bring together my publications in one place for readers.

The present anthology is, nevertheless, only a small selection. My English publications can be divided into roughly three periods of more or less equal lengths. The first period (1989 – 1996), when I was a visiting scholar and then AIO (university research assistant) at the University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands, is composed largely of work in discourse analysis; the second (1997 – 2003), when I was teaching at the National University of Singapore and then the University of Ulster, UK, is more of a meandering and exploratory phase and sees some ventures in such disciplines as discursive psychology, cultural psychology, cultural studies, socio-cultural and political domains; and the most recent period (2004 – 2013), which is more imaginative and prolific, is devoted consistently and firmly to developing and establishing the two broad and interrelated fields: Cultural Discourse Studies and Chinese Discourse Studies. But here in this collection I have selected only the more typical and representative pieces; moreover, I have other considerations in making my choices and organizing them.

I have wanted this collection to reflect to some extent the trajectory of my intellectual development on the one hand and on the other hand to indicate the terrains of research interests, orientations, approaches, disciplines, academic genres and socio-cultural domains that my academic journey has covered. Readers will find clues to these from the dates of the publications and the types of materials presented here. Beyond presenting such a personal record, further, I wish to showcase somehow a mode of research that a Chinese scholar could fashion, where one's scholarship is imbricated with wider historical and cultural context and in particular cultural-political and cultural-intellectual concerns. Readers will ascertain these historical and cultural traces in the changes of my research topics and objectives. In this regard, as should be stressed here, I have not lived in one and the

same place but have been much of a globe-trotter — from China to Holland, Singapore, the UK, and then back to China over a space of fifteen years. These geopolitical displacements have left their marks, too, for example in the data materials treated, intellectual sources consulted, and research directions embarked on.

Most important of all, I have wanted to use this selected personal-cultural-intellectual account to make a case for multicultural scholarship on human discourse and communication: when global capitalism and Western hegemony have increasingly encroached upon the human and social sciences and the academe as a whole, of which discourse scholarship is a typical example, culturally conscious and critical modes of research are urgently needed in order for intercultural dialogue, genuine innovation, and helpful scholarship to become possible. This means, especially for scholars and students of the developing Third/Fourth World, that we must break out of the shackles of the Western-centric forms of thinking and speaking and reconstruct locally grounded and globally minded academic identities, stances, voices, or more specifically, paradigms of discourse research.

Whilst keeping in mind all these considerations, I have classified the materials more according to the kinds of specific research aims, hence under three headings: (1) cultural critiques of discourse scholarship; (2) studies of cultural forms and functions of discourse; and (3) enquiries into culturally new or unfamiliar discourses. In the first part, readers will find critical discussions of Western and Chinese perspectives and approaches. Here the strengths and weaknesses of different cultural intellectual traditions are weighed and transformations, reconstructions or innovations proposed. From another perspective, this part may be said to deal with basic paradigmatic issues in discourse studies. The next part presents a set of studies of a variety of discourse forms and functions as they appear in diverse cultural and communicative settings. Thus readers will see how people describe, explain, evaluate, argue about their inner experiences and external realities and how they are guided by their cultures in doing so. So this part is more empirical, form-focused, and culturally oriented. The last part is concerned with empirical research of actual discourses, too, but more particularly motivated by practical issues of cultural hegemony and cultural development. Thus here discourses that are normally marginalized, excluded or prejudiced against are brought to the fore and explained culturally; also, culturally new discourses, potential or real, are identified, highlighted or argued for. So this part is more pro-active, not only within the scholarship but also in the world at large.

Since the book is entitled, *Discourse and Culture*, I might as well give my definitions of these terms, from my current point of view.

'Discourse' refers to situated linguistic-communicative event(s) in which participants interact through language and other symbols; it is cultural and historical in the sense that cultural concepts, values, power, etc on the one hand and historical relations on the other hand operate in the interactive process. 'Culture' is a set of concepts, values, attitudes, representations, rules, patterns, of a particular social community that are embodied in their actions and artifacts; it is dynamic and power-saturated.

As will become clear from these intellectual excursions of mine, I have benefited extremely from trespassing linguistic, disciplinary, paradigmatic and cultural boundaries. But more importantly, I must add, my professional life is broadened and enriched enormously by the advice and assistance I have received from so many friends, colleagues, students, publishers from different parts of the world.

The present book is meant for the widest possible readership, both at home and abroad, in discourse and communication studies and further afield in the social and human sciences. It may be used as a supplementary textbook in any discourse and communication studies course. Also, since the collection contains many studies of the discourses of the Chinese, Asian and 'Eastern' peoples, it should interest those who wish to learn about their cultures and their places in the world. Of course, to what extent I succeed in these designs is a matter for the reader to judge.





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Part One

# **Cultural Critiques of Discourse Scholarship**



# 1

## Open up Discourse-Theoretical Frontiers\*

Whilst the academic turnout of discourse studies is increasing each year, one sees nowadays less and less discussion, let alone debate, over the basic, underlying theoretical assumptions therein. The same, or similar, concepts, models or otherwise incorporations of kindred theoretical ideas, say, psychological, sociological, anthropological, are being reproduced and applied un-problematically — irrespective of the changing times, shifting spaces and diverging cultures. At a cultural-intellectual level, mainstream discourse theory, as may be said, has reached a near-stagnation. At a cultural-political level, worse still, dominant but culturally alien concepts, categories and values are being deployed to reproduce stereotypic or even colonist knowledge. The reasons behind this state of theoretical thinking, or un-thinking, are multiple and complex, ranging from particular forms of ancient philosophy, modern marketing, to presumably academic dependencies, especially on the part of non-Western scholarly communities.

In the present *Editorial*, I should like to try and suggest some possible strategies for shunning theoretical inbreeding and for broadening, enriching, refining, invigorating, re-orienting, or transforming altogether, discourse-theoretical thinking. A first strategy may be to look out for and research *new issues, topics, and questions* that are relevant to the challenges of the 21st century in general and to the urgent needs and concerns of the (under-)developing regions and societies in particular. Local, practical and socially

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\* This is originally published in *Journal of Multicultural Discourses*, 2011, 6(3): 211–213, under the title of “Editorial: Open up discourse-theoretical frontiers”.

significant issues are often overlooked by familiar, conventional theory born in metropolitan centres. Coming to terms with new phenomena and problems such as in the fast changing, non-Western world may compel one to forsake facile categories and explanations and come up with more practical, realistic, and sophisticated notions, categories and frameworks, ushering in genuine theoretical innovation thereby (Prah 2000; see also *Editorial* in this journal, 2009, 4(3)).

A second strategy for pushing theoretical frontiers is *to be historically conscious* in re-conceptualizing human discourses (see for example Chen 2000; Ishii 2001). Still in the shadows of linguistic structuralism, much of mainstream theory has tended to be static, oblivious of the historically critical and dynamic ways in which human discourses can get changed across large spaces of time and in culture-specific ways (but see Fairclough 1992). Present discourses may adopt new values, concepts, vocabulary, and rules of communication, for example; they may involve new social, cultural agents and relations; they may maintain, alter, change, or discontinue classical or conventional modes of speaking/understanding. Re-visioning a culture's discourses from the viewpoint of their past practices, therefore, can yield insights into the otherwise unnoticed characteristics of its present or even future discourses.

A third important strategy for renovating current discourse theory is to tap into *native, cultural-intellectual resources*, especially in the non-Western world, which are being eroded by modern tides of globalization (see for example Dissanayake 1988; Kim 2002). On one side, indigenous philosophical wisdoms, whether in the form of worldviews or moral values, have a role in guiding a culture's ordinary and academic life. Studies of the relevant philosophical heritages therefore can help complement or even transform the existing theory by broadening, sharpening, or refining one's perspectives and viewpoints. On the other side, a culture's native scholarship, with its own perspectives, conceptions, categories, values, etc., of language and communication, contains an insider's, expert knowledge on the discourse in question. Drawing upon such local academic work, consequently, can provide one with crucial technical information for theoretical re-thinking (see special issues of this journal, 2009, 4[1], 2010, 5[2] and 2010, 5[3]).

A fourth, related strategy is to be *multicultural* and to actively engage in intercultural dialogue and critique in theory re-generation (see for example Kincaid 1987; Shi-xu 2005). Because the current established discourse theory offers an important frame of reference (and not merely being a theory-conversational partner), and because other cultures, however, may have different and effective theoretical apparatuses as well, researchers from whichever intellectual lineages

can have much to gain from culturally-mutual learning, supporting and critiquing, and perhaps create possibilities of 'third-space' theoretical breakthrough. This implies that the researcher should unlearn the universalist, monological and imperialist theoretical discourse, on the one hand and on the other, to search for, study and re-interpret unfamiliar, foreign theoretical ideas, whether or not they come from developing societies or else disadvantaged communities, in order to reconstruct truly original, effective and helpful cultural-discourse theory (Shi-xu 2005, 2009).

Finally, as an overarching attitude and strategy, the researcher should be *continuously reflexive* upon one's theoretical and empirical practice and guard especially on the efficiency and usefulness of one's research to the groups and communities under social science investigation. Theory is designed and constructed for helping solve problems; theory of discourse, even more so, for coming to grips with socially and culturally significant problems. If and when it falters, one will have to reconsider, change or modify theory accordingly, making theoretical advances thereby.

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## 2

# Binary vs. Holistic Concepts of Discourse and Culture\*

### INTRODUCTION

At the end of the last chapter, I raised the reflexive issue of the status of theoretical discourse in relation to alternative versions, real or potential. The question there related to my own account of discourse of course; I rejected the realist position of representationalism and then suggested a different, reality-constitutive one. Is my own version not realist in nature? If not, what is its specific status, or that of any such anti-representationalist position, in relation to other, different versions? However, when I raised that question, I also had a further, larger question in mind. Namely, what is the relation between such a theoretical discourse to culture? Is a universal theory of discourse possible, or even desirable?

Lying at the heart of these questions, I believe, is a more fundamental, but hitherto much marginalised, issue in discourse studies — and it is a motivating one for the present chapter; the general relation between discourse (ordinary and disciplinary) and culture. Are they discrete entities separable from each other? Or, on the contrary, are they intermeshed so that you cannot say this is where discourse begins and that is where culture ends? The discipline of discourse studies, however, has tended to assume culture as basically an epi-phenomenon, external to discourse. Discourse ‘itself’ is universal; i.e. across human

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\* This is originally published in Shi-xu’s *A Cultural Approach to Discourse* (2005), Basingstoke, England/New York: Palgrave Macmillan, under the title of “Discourse and culture” (Chapter 2).



cultures, the ‘underlying’ forms and functions of discourse are more or less the same. This conception explains why discourse analysts usually present themselves as objective and neutral, dispassionate and impersonal — acultural, so to speak. In the same way, it explains why textbooks, handbooks commonly paint a universal image of the models and methods they proffer. This view of discourse and culture further accounts for the fact that discourse studies continues to be preoccupied with making itself a cross-disciplinary, inter-disciplinary, multi-disciplinary, trans-disciplinary enterprise, but not concerned with the cultural diversity of human discourses. As the result of the marginalisation of culture and hence owing to the grand master discourse of all discourses, a hegemonic order of the discipline is established and maintained and culturally alternative theories repressed or silenced.

How can we then construct a culturally pluralist theory of discourse? Further, once such a theory is adopted, how can we uphold the multicultural perspective and at the same time keep the dialogue between diverse theoretical discourses critical and productive? In order to find a conceptual tool for the job, I shall draw on a range of critical insights from cultural studies. These currents highlight the diversities and interconnections, power and dynamic that saturate contemporary culture, including discourse, its quintessential medium and embodiment. From these, it becomes clear that it is neither possible, nor desirable, to formulate, ‘from above’, a universalist theory or, ‘from below’, a particularist theory. So, instead of continuing to tackle the issue from the binary, universal-particular standpoint, I propose that we theorise discourse *from in between cultures*.

To take an in-between-cultural stance on (discourse) theoretical articulation is not to describe or explain anything from any representationalist and universalist point of view. Rather, as a theory-conceptual strategy, the in-between-cultural stance places culture at the heart of understanding and critique of discourse, ordinary and disciplinary alike. It also creates an opportunity for cultural-political intervention. In this way, the individual theorist will be able to draw attention to the special, complex and all-important question of cultural relationship and common cultural fate, whether it regards the East and West, the West and Rest, the North and South, America and the Third World, or White and non-White. The researcher will also be able to construct, not certain or true knowledge, but a culturally dialogical, creative, double vision. Most important of all perhaps, the theorist will be in a position to find and formulate innovative values and cultural-political objectives in his/her intellectual work.

Adopting this proposed conceptual strategy, I explore the cultural nature of discourse as I outline, in a preliminary and suggestive way, a