DISCOURSE ANALYSIS: KEY CONCEPTS AND PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT

Moving from one layer of language to another, linguists consider the discourse level the apex of linguistic description. The enterprise of Discourse Analysis is to uncover the regularities of language that surpass the sentence_ the traditional 'highest' unit of description _ and that encompass the context of its use. Discourse Analysis is interdisciplinary in nature and has applications in several fields to which language has a particular relevance. The purpose of this paper is to briefly sketch out some of its key concepts and major broad lines of research.

KEY WORDS: discourse, text, context, coherence, utterance, discourse analysis, interdisciplinarity.

INTRODUCTION

Within the last few decades, in an attempt to apprehend what constitutes knowledge of language, a remarkable shift of interest in the sentence and its components to a concern with stretches of language that transcend sentence boundaries and extend far to include the world in which language is used has arisen. This relatively new approach, known as Discourse Analysis, occupies now a body of literature, which probes into its nature, methods, scope and applications in a number of fields. Basically, any attempt to overview this sort of analysis tackles four main points: What is discourse? What is Discourse Analysis? Why Discourse Analysis? And what are its main lines of inquiry?

DISCOURSE

Etymologically, the word 'discourse' dates back to the 14th century. It is taken from the Latin word 'discursus' which means a 'conversation' (McArthur, 1996). In its current usage, this term conveys a number of significations for a variety of purposes, but in all cases it relates to language, and it describes it in some way.

To start with, *discourse* is literally defined as 'a serious speech or piece of writing on a particular subject' (*Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, 2001, p.388). In this general sense, it incorporates both the spoken and written modes although, at times, it is confined to speech being designated as 'a

serious conversation between people' (ibid). This restriction is also implied in the word when it is used as a verb.

Carter (1993) specifies several denotations of the word 'discourse.' First, it refers to the topics or types of language used in definite contexts. Here, it is possible to talk of *political discourse*, *philosophical discourse* and the like. Second, the word 'discourse' is occasionally employed to stand for what is spoken, while the word 'text' is employed to denote what is written. It is important to note, however, that the text/discourse distinction highlighted here is not always sharply defined. Nunan (1993) shows that these two terms are sometimes used interchangeably and in many instances treated differently. Carter (ibid) adds that the 'discourse/text' dichotomy is often correlated with the 'process/product' dichotomy respectively. Third, this word is used to establish a significant contrast with the traditional notion of 'sentence', the 'highest' unit of language analysis: discourse refers to any naturally occurring stretch of language. In this connection, Trask (1999) clarifies that a discourse is not confined to one speaker or writer, but it can embrace the oral or written exchanges produced by two or more people. It is this last sense of the term that constitutes the cornerstone of the approach known as Discourse Analysis.

Despite that discourse is defined as a chunk that surpasses the sentence, not all chunks of language can fall within the scope of this definition. In fact, what characterizes discourse is obviously not its supra-sentential nature as much as the entirety it has_ its *coherence*. To be more explicit, discourse is a complete meaningful unit conveying a complete message (Nunan, 1993). The nature of this whole cannot be perceived by examining its constituent parts, 'there are structured relationships among the parts that result in something new' (Schiffrin, 2006, p.171). In the light of this, larger units such as paragraphs, conversations and interviews all seem to fall under the rubric of 'discourse' since they are linguistic performances complete in themselves.

DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

To embark on defining discourse analysis (henceforth DA), one would inevitably tackle two divergent approaches to language in general and discourse in particular: the formal approach and the functional approach. Schiffrin (ibid) combines both approaches when designating DA as 'the study of language use above and beyond the sentence' (p.170).

The first trend in defining DA is a formal or structural trend. In this paradigm, DA is seen as the exploration of language use by focusing on pieces larger than sentences. Schiffrin (1994) elucidates that discourse is merely a higher level in the hierarchy: morpheme, clause and sentence (as stated originally by Zellig Harris in his first reference to DA); she also explains that the pursuit of DA is to depict the internal structural relationships that tie the units of discourse to each other: to describe formal connectedness within it.

The second trend is functional in perspective: it is not so much concerned with intra-sentential relations as much as with language use. Brown and Yule's (1983) conception seems to be compatible with this paradigm:

> The analysis of discourse is, necessarily, the analysis of language in use. As such, it cannot be restricted to the description of linguistic forms

independent of the purposes or functions which these forms are designed to serve in human affairs. (p.1)

The focus in this conception is on the regularities which utterances show when situated in contexts. Thus, it is obvious that the aspects of the world in which an utterance is used can also contribute to the meaningfulness of discourse. Van Els et al. (1984), in this respect, argue that 'the study of language *in context* will offer a deeper insight into how meaning is attached to utterances than the study of language in isolated sentences' (p.94).

WHY DISCOURSE ANALYSIS?

It seems quite legitimate to question the need for such an approach since it has become typical to describe language in linguistic formal or functional terms and since there has been a long tradition of exploring systematicity within language and determining regularities at all its levels. The answer lies in what constitutes 'knowledge of language'.

It is plain to every one that any language user subconsciously possesses the aptitude for constructing sentences out of their minor components, i.e. sounds, morphemes, words…, as well as the aptitude for interpreting them. This grammatical knowledge of sentence structure, in the Chomskyan sense, is an element one cannot do without when utilising language. Carter (1993) illustrates that in many cases of naturally produced language, series of grammatical sentences may not be susceptible to understanding, while grammatically erroneous ones may be easily interpretable. In other words, there are features of language that cannot be accounted for in grammatical terms: some kind of systematicity is thought to transcend the grammar of sentences. 'The sentences that make up a text need to be grammatical but grammatical sentences alone will not ensure that the text itself makes sense' (Nunan, 1993, p.2). This demonstrates that some rules distinct from grammar rules are at work. Yule (1985) concludes that attaining an interpretation of the messages we receive and making our own messages interpretable is not a matter of linguistic form and structure alone. Language users know more than that: they know 'discourse' rules.

CONTEXT AND THE ANALYSIS OF DISCOURSE

In pursuit of uncovering the global structure of naturally occurring stretches of language, spoken or written, discourse analysts _ as stated above_ resort to the study of language bits in the contexts within which they are used. Widdowson (1973) points out that context, being the environment in which language is used, can be linguistic or extra-linguistic.

Context can be approached from a linguistic angle, and this complies with the formal definition of discourse first raised by Harris (1952). In this perspective, the analyst relies on the linguistic elements that surround the utterances under scrutiny to arrive at an adequate interpretation of meaning on the basis of intra-textual relations that bind them. This is referred to as 'the linguistic context'. The term 'co-text' is usually employed to refer to this particular sense of context (Yule, ibid; Hartmann and Stork, 1972). Carter (1993) expounds on co-text and shows the interrelatedness of linguistic items within it:

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> The internal environment of the text is also an established context, although not such an obvious one. All textual features whether at word, clause, or between-sentence level are part of an environment: any word relates to those words which surround it both in the immediate vicinity and in other parts of the text. Even whole texts are governed by their textual environment. (Carter 1993: 14)

It is possible for the analyst to arrive at the exact message conveyed in speech or in writing on the basis of what surrounds the linguistic item. It appears from this discussion that the enterprise of DA is, partly, to investigate the linguistic context, the way sentences are interrelated and the formal properties that make a piece of discourse hang together.

Context can equally be approached from a wider perspective where discourse interpretation and construction go beyond its linguistic boundaries to include the external world. It is believed that a great deal of significance can be obtained from the analysis of the broader social situation in which language is used. The latter is termed the 'context of situation' by J. R. Firth (Léon, 2005) or the 'referential context' (Nunan, 1993). This type of context also guides the structure of discourse (Van Els et al., 1984). Thus, determining the key features of the situation justifies some linguistic choices that are made by language users.

Discourse analysts venture to unveil the patterning of the situational context and to state its relationship to the patterning of discourse itself. Robins (1971) stresses this task of DA:

> By setting up contexts of situation, the observer or analyst undertakes to state the relationship of utterances to the situations or environments in which they are said or could be said. In a context of situation the utterance or the successive sentences in it are brought into multiple relations with the relevant components of the environment. (p.25)

There have been several attempts to analyse the external environment and categorise it. Nunan's (1993) account of the components of extra-linguistic context seems to be comprehensive. He specifies (1) the type of communicative event (for example, joke, story, lecture, greeting, conversation); (2) the topic; (3) the purpose of the event; (4) the setting, including location, time of day, season of year and physical aspects of the situation (for example, the size of the room, arrangement of furniture); (5) the participants and the relationships between them; and (6) the background knowledge and assumptions underlying the communicative event.

It follows, according to what has been stated above, that DA shifts the focus of linguistic analysis from a sentence-centred approach , and it takes it one step further to examine the interplay of language items and the way they merge with the external world to get their real communicative identity. Here the linguistic behaviour appears to be the outcome of a larger discourse apparatus, including the traditional grammatical one.

THE SCOPE OF DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

The analysis of discourse shares its quest with a number of disciplines in which language occupies a prominent position being the principal means of

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human communication. This overlap is, as Schiffrin (1994) points out, obviously due to the arduousness of describing language in isolation:

> It is difficult to separate language from the rest of the world. It is this ultimate inability to separate language from how it is used in the world in which we live that provides the most basic reason for the interdisciplinary basis of discourse analysis. To understand the language of discourse, then, we need to understand the world in which it resides; and to understand the world in which language resides, we need to go outside of linguistics. (Schiffrin as cited in Widdowson, 1996, p. 110)

The construction of discourse itself involves several processes that operate simultaneously. Probing into this construction requires analytical tools that derive from linguistics, sociology, psychology, anthropology, and even philosophy, according to the nature of these processes. Being informed by approaches in such fields gives DA an interdisciplinary nature and makes it a wide-ranging and a heterogeneous branch of linguistics with a medley of theoretical perspectives and analytical methods depending on the aspect of language being emphasised.

It is possible to distinguish several subfields within DA stemming out of works in different domains. McCarthy (1991) comments that this approach, despite being interdisciplinary, finds its unity in the description of 'language above the sentence' and a concern with the contexts and cultural influences that affect language in use. In a brief historical overview, he specifies the following main contributors to DA research, whose interest has been, in some way, the study of larger stretches of language and their interaction with the external world as a communicative framework. The following points summarize this complex cross-affiliation of DA, as expatiated on by McCarthy:

1. Harris's (1952) work on text structure and the links between text and social situation,
2. Semiotics and the French structuralist approach to the study of narrative,
3. Dell Hymes's studies in the 1960's of speech in its social setting,
4. The linguistic philosophers Austin, Searle and Grice's interest in the social nature of speech (speech act theory & conversational maxims),
5. Pragmatics and its focus on meaning in context,
6. M.A.K. Halliday's functional approach to language in the 1970's,
7. Ethnomethodology and its concern with cross-cultural features of naturally occurring communication within specified speech events,
8. The study of classroom talk as developed by Sinclair and Coulthard in the 1970's,
9. Conversation analysis _the study of recurring patterns in natural spoken interaction,
10. The analysis of oral storytelling as part of narrative discourse analysis by William Labov,
11. Text-grammarians' work on written discourse exemplified by Halliday & Hasan's and Van Dijk's interest in internal textual connectedness,
12. The Prague School of linguistics and its focus on the relationship between grammar and discourse.

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CONCLUSION

      It has been demonstrated through this paper that the hybrid approach of discourse analysis adds novel dimensions to linguistic analysis that go beyond the sentence and seeks to reveal the regularities of the context of language use, both linguistic and extra-linguistic. Following this line, it is believed that a host of theoretical insights concerning this interplay between language and context can be exploited to attain the resolution of a number of practical problems in many domains that involve language use as a central component. On this premise, a real 'boom' is taking place in many fields such as foreign and second language teaching, translation studies, stylistic studies and so many others, taking a discourse orientation rather than a traditional sentence orientation.

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