

Lecture2: An Introduction to Discourse Analysis (2)

1. 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.

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).” (Drid, 2010, pp.21-22).

2. Text analysis

Text analysis is concerned with the structure of the written language as found in book chapters, short stories, letters, etc.

3. The difference between oral and written discourse

Undeniably, there exist differences between spoken and written discourse.

“The following are some generalizations, to which there are certain exceptions.

3.1. Permanence

Written discourse is fixed and stable so the reading can be done at whatever time, speed and level of thoroughness the individual reader wishes. Spoken text in contrast is fleeting, and moves on in real time. The listener – though he or she may occasionally interrupt to request clarification – must in general follow what is said at the speed set by the speaker.

3.2. Explicitness

The written text is explicit; it has to make clear the context and all references. In speech the real-time situation and knowledge shared between speaker and listener means that some information can be assumed and need not be made explicit.

3.3. Density

The content is presented much more densely in writing. In speech, the information is “diluted” and conveyed through many more words: there are a lot of repetitions, glosses, “fillers”, producing a text is noticeably longer and with more redundant passages.

3.4. Detachment

The writing of a text is detached in time and space from its reading; the writer normally works alone, and may not be acquainted with his or her readers. Speaking usually takes place in immediate interaction with known listeners, with the availability of immediate feedback.

3.5. Organization

A written text is usually organized and carefully formulated, since its composer has time and opportunity to edit it before making it available for reading. A speaker is improvising as he or she speaks: ongoing alterations, in the shape of glosses, self-corrections and so on produce an apparently disorganized 'stream-of-consciousness' kind of discourse. Thus a written text conforms more to conventional rules of grammar, and its vocabulary is more precise and formal.

3.6. Slowness of production, speed of reception

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Writing is much slower than speaking. On the other hand, we can usually read a piece of text and understand it much faster than we can take in the same text if we listen while someone reads it aloud to us.

3.7. Standard language

Writing normally uses a generally acceptable standard variety of the language, whereas speech may sometimes be in a regional or other limited-context dialect. In some languages (Chinese, for example), the various spoken dialects may even be mutually incomprehensible, while the written language is universally understood.

3.8. A learnt skill

Most people acquire the spoken language (at least of their own mother tongue) intuitively, whereas the written form is in most cases deliberately taught and learned.

3.9. Sheer amount and importance

Spoken texts are far longer, normally (in the sense that they contain more words), than a representation of the same information in writing. It is also, I think, true to say that most people speak far more than they write. Associated with this point is a third: that speech is more important for survival and effective functioning in society than writing is.”

Sources

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