

Lecture1 : Text vs Discourse

1. Text

The term text refers to a written material with a communicative purpose. A text is novels, articles, essays, leaflets, travel guides, bills menus, road signs are examples of texts.

In fact, the term text is commonly used in linguistics and stylistics to refer to a sequential collection of sentences or utterances which form a unity by reason of their linguistic COHESION and semantic COHERENCE. e.g. a scientific article; a recipe; poem; public lecture; etc.

Halliday and Hassan (1976, pp1-2) stated that the word text is “used in linguistics to refer to any passage- spoken or written, of whatever length, that does form a unified whole [...] A text is a unit of language in use. It is not a grammatical unit, like a clause or a sentence; and it is not defined by its size [...] A text is best regarded as a SEMANTIC unit; a unit not of form but of meaning.”

Yet, it is possible for a text to consist of only one sentence or utterance or even one word, e.g. a notice or road-sign (Exit; Stop), which is semantically complete in itself, and pragmatically tied to a specific situation.

Overall, text is not easily defined, nor is it clearly distinguished from discourse. Some discourse analysts (e.g. Coulthard 1977) would reserve text for written language, and apply discourse to spoken communication. Besides, some linguists make a distinction between the notions of 'text,' viewed as a physical product, and 'discourse,' viewed as a dynamic process of expression and interpretation, whose function and mode of operation can be investigated using psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic, as well as linguistic, techniques." (David Crystal, *Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics*, 6th ed. Blackwell, 2008).

2. Characteristics of textuality

What makes the text a **unified meaningful whole** rather than a mere string of unrelated words and sentences?

According to Beaugrande and Dressler (1981), there are seven **standards of textuality**.

- **Cohesion**
- **Coherence**
- **Intentionality** (having a plan or purpose)
- **Acceptability** (having some use for the receiver)
- **Informativity** (degree of new information)
- **Situationality** (relevance to the context)
- **Intertextuality** (relations with other texts)

It must be emphasized that these features designate the modes of connectedness between the various elements of the text but they do not draw a borderline between 'text' and 'non-text'. An intentional or unacceptable piece of writing may be judged inappropriate or ineffective but still it is a text.

3. Text Linguistics

Text Linguistics as a sub-branch of Linguistics did not really develop until the early 1970s, until linguistics itself began to be less concerned with the *sentence* as the prime unit of analysis i.e. when it began to take care of potential units larger than a sentence.

Text linguists have drawn attention to the various linguistic devices that can be used to ensure that a text "hangs together" (cf. the concept of textual cohesion). Such devices are called "cohesive devices or cohesive ties" and they include the use of lexical repetition, the use of articles, personal pronouns to refer back to entities mentioned earlier in a text and the use of linking words to establish a particular logical relationship of, say, contrast, concession or addition between two or more sentences in a text.

Text linguistics is concerned with the description and analysis of extended texts (either spoken or written) in communicative contexts. David Crystal noted that text linguistics, in some ways, "overlaps considerably with . . . discourse analysis and some linguists see very little difference between them" (*Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics*, 2008).

4. 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.

Occasionally, the word 'discourse' is employed to stand for what is spoken, while the word 'text' is employed to denote what is written.

Opposite to the previous view, Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (2001, p.388) literally defines discourse as 'a serious **speech or piece of writing** on a particular subject.'

The APA Dictionary DEFINED Discourse as « the areas of written, spoken, and signed communication, whether formal (debate) or informal (conversation).

Often, the word discourse 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. That is, the term discourse refers to the use of language beyond single sentences. The term is most often used in [linguistics](#), where **discourse analysts** focus on both the study of language (sentences, speech acts, and lexicons) as well as the rhetoric, meanings, and strategies that underlie social interactions. » discourse is most simply understood today as a sort of unit of language organized around a particular subject matter and meaning. This can be contrasted to other ways in which language has been broken down into much smaller units of analysis, such as into individual words or sentences in studies of semantics and syntax.

Furthermore, as opposed to the linguistic conception of language as a generally stable, unified, abstract symbolic system, discourse denotes real manifestations of language-actual speech or writing.

The term ‘discourse’ also refers to the **topics** and types of language used in definite contexts (Carter, 1993). In this regard, it is relevant to mention political discourse, medical discourse, religious discourse, academic discourse, legal discourse, solidarity discourse, crisis discourse and the like. For instance, academic discourse is defined as a specific style of communication used in the academic world. It can include written and verbal communication formats.

In addition, the idea of discourse often signifies a particular awareness of social influences on the use of language. It is therefore important to distinguish between discourse and the Saussurean concept of the parole as a real manifestation of language (Saussure, 11-17).

Saussure's distinction between langue and parole is such: langue is a linguistic system or code which is prior to the actual use of language and which is stable, homogenous and equally accessible to all members of a linguistic community. Parole is what is actually spoken or written, and varies according to individual choice. Thus while discourse is also what is actually spoken or written, it differs from parole in that it is used to denote manifestations of language that are determined by social influences from society as a whole, rather than by individual agency.

Overall, Discourse is the verbal or written exchange of ideas. Any unit of connected speech or writing that is longer than a sentence and that has a coherent meaning and a clear purpose is referred to as discourse.

An example of discourse is when you discuss something with your friends in person or over a chat platform. **Spoken discourse** refers to the linguistic utterances used when we interact with each other, as we express and discuss our thoughts and feelings. Examples of spoken discourse are : conversations, talk-shows, presidential debates, sermons, etc. However, **written discourse** (which can consist of novels, poems, diaries, plays, film scripts, emails, books, etc.) provides records of decades-long shared information.

However, the text/discourse distinction highlighted above is not always sharply defined. Nunan (1993) shows that these two terms are sometimes used interchangeably and in many instances treated differently.

Very common now discourse is used in a very comprehensive way for all those aspects of the *situation* or **context** of communication, including producers, receivers, relations between them, the text itself (written or spoken) and the setting (time, place).

5. Types of discourse?

The four types of discourse are **description, narration, exposition** and **argumentation**.

Types of discourse	Purpose for the type of discourse
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Description	Helps the audience visualise the item or subject by relying on the five senses.
Narration	Aims to tell a story through a <u>Narrator</u> , who usually gives an account of an event.
Exposition	Conveys background information to the audience in a relatively neutral way.
Argumentation	Aims to persuade and convince the audience of an idea or a statement.

6. 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.

a. 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.

b. 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.

c. 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.

d. 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.

e. 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.

f. Slowness of production, speed of reception

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.

g. 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.

h. 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.

i. 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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