

Lecture 1: Discourse Analysis

Introduction

Discourse analysis is an area of research concerned with how language is used in different social contexts and how it functions taking into consideration both forms of language written and spoken at the sentence level and beyond. That is, discourse analysis is the study of spoken and written language in use. To understand the notion of “Discourse analysis”, one should first develop an understanding of the term discourse.

1/ What is Discourse?

When people communicate, they send and receive messages. Sometimes, however, those messages might not be clear enough to be easily understood unless the two participants share some knowledge about each other and also about the messages being exchanged. This knowledge or information about the message can be called discourse. Note that the message might be in a spoken or a written form.



Dating back to the 14th century, the term discourse is derived from the Latin word ‘discursus’ which means ‘**conversation**’ (McArthur, 1996 cited in Drid 2010). Although this word has been used to signify a number of notions, still its use is closely tied to language describing it in one way or another.

Henceforth, one is to reconsider a number of definitions.

According to the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, the term discourse is defined as ‘a serious speech or piece of writing on a particular subject’ (2001, p.388). It can also refer to a “serious conversation between people. In some contexts, the term discourse is used to

denote something spoken while the term text is used to denote something written. Nonetheless, these distinctions are not always emphasized as the two terms might be used interchangeably while at other times treated differently. (Nunan 1993 cited in Drid 2010). It also refers to any naturally occurring stretch of language written or conversed by one or more than one speaker or writer. (Drid, 2010)

The term discourse refers to chunks of language, be them spoken or written, used in different settings. “The simplest definition of **discourse** is *language-in-use*.” Rymes (2008: p12). In its written version discourse might refer to an essay written by a student, a journal article, a novel, an excerpt from a book while spoken discourse might be a speech, a dialogue, or an interview.

It is worth noting that not any use of language beyond sentence level is discourse. There is a condition that needs to be present which is coherence. Discourse is a complete meaningful unit conveying a complete message. (Nunan 1993 in Drid 2010)

2/What is Discourse Analysis?

Once the notion of discourse has been defined, it is high time to develop an understanding of DISCOURSE ANALYSIS (DA)

“Discourse analysis is concerned with the study of the relationship between language and the contexts in which it is used.” McCarthy (1991: p.5)

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). (cited in Drid 2010 p, 20-25)

Works Cited

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