Module Discourse Analysis   **Level: Master 1English**

Lecture 2: Major Concerns of Discourse Analysis

Here, we need to go back to the major question

What is discourse analysis?

It is "the close study of language and language use as evidence of aspects of society and social life'.

One starting point is that discourse analysis usually refers to a research approach in which language material, such as talk or written texts, and sometimes other material altogether, is examined as evidence of phenomena *beyond the individual person.* To understand this, imagine looking at some old letters, written several decades or even centuries ago. Each letter will of course be interesting for what it conveys about the writer's **situation, opinions and feelings.** However, it can also provide more general **evidence of society at that earlier time**. For instance, passing references may suggest what is taken for granted, including the priorities and values shared by members of society. Some of the words used may even be offensive to a contemporary reader, for instance, because they are linked to assumptions about class or gender or race which have since been questioned. In addition, some of the writing may seem 'old-fashioned' in its style and level of formality because there have been changes in the directness with which people express opinions or state disagreements. If letters between both parties to the correspondence have survived, they will provide further insights into how people communicated at that time, including the conventions which operate in particular relationships, business or personal. In short, each letter, however private its original purpose, is potentially of interest as evidence of social phenomena, in a way that the writer could not have anticipated. This is the level of interpretation employed by a discourse analyst.

To explain the variety of discourse analytic research, it is useful to distinguish two lines of academic work. They do not encompass all the variations in discourse analysis and in practice, they tend to converge particularly around the **study of difference and inequality** and the workings of **power in society**,

The focus of the first line of academic work is the nature of language. Traditionally, linguistics, or 'linguistics proper', can be defined narrowly as 'the study of "grammar" in a broad sense: the sound systems of language ("phonology"), the grammatical structure of words ("morphology") and of sentences ("syntax") and more formal aspects of meaning ("semantics")'

(Fairclough, 2001a, p. 5). However, sociolinguists and many other academics consider language as inseparable from its social contexts. Among many other aspects of language use, they study

differences in how people speak (and write) which are linked to class and other social categories, or to a particular activity, situation, role and purpose. Summarized somewhat crudely, this line of writing and research can therefore be said to have extended from the concerns of '**linguistics proper**' to explore features of language linked, again, to **social phenomena.** Discourse analytic research in this line includes investigations of the details of *how language varies across contexts* and can *mark social difference*, and *how children acquire competence in language use* and, again, *how that competence is linked to identity and social difference*. (Taylor 2013: p.1-3)

The Purpose of Discourse Analysis

Discourse analysis has a major aim which is investigating functions of language. That is, what language is **used for** and how people construct meaning in different contexts (including social, cultural, political, and historical backgrounds of the discourse.