

A Social Cultural Approach to Discourse Analysis

Hongzhi Wu

Qingdao University of Science and Technology, Qingdao, China

Email: yx_jinxiuwhz@126.com

Abstract—Discourse analysis as a research method can be found in two major families, linguistic-based analysis (such as conversation) and culturally or socially based discursive practices. From the angle of method, discourse analysis can be divided into five categories, that is, structural analysis, cognitive analysis, social cultural analysis, critical analysis and synthetic analysis. In the paper, Social cultural analysis is chosen to be discussed as it regards discourse as interactional activities and emphasizes the social function of language. Language interaction involves all sorts of social cultural contexts; the author tries his best to make an exploration in discourse analysis from the social cultural approach so as to contribute something to the research.

Index Terms—social culture, discourse analysis, context, cognition

Discourse analysis can be divided into five categories from the angle of method, that is, structural analysis, cognitive analysis, social cultural analysis, critical analysis and synthetic analysis. Social cultural analysis regards discourse as interactional activities and emphasizes the social function of language. This method not only analyses word and sentence expression form and meaning, but also analyzes all kinds of social cultural factors related to discourse. This method insists that the speaker as an individual and one entity of a society not only want to transmit information or expresses thoughts, but also attempt to engage in certain social activities in different social situations and social institutions. Most discourse analysis concentrates on form, meaning, interaction and cognition, while social cultural analysis emphasizes the function of context besides what mentioned above. Since that language interaction involves all sorts of social cultural contexts, we cannot fix the meaning of language element in terms of its place in the whole sentence. We should also take the context, in which the discourse is produced, into consideration. On the different levels of the discourse, we can see that the social features of the participants plays an important role in the context, such as gender, classes, ethnics, age, social status and so on. The relationship between discourse and context is a dialectical one. Discourse is not only in and under the effect of context, but also influences, establishes or transforms context.

Language has a magical property: when we speak or write we craft what we have to say to fit the situation or context in which we are communicating. But, at the same time, how we speak or write creates that very situation or context. It seems, then, that we fit our language to a situation or context, in turn, that our language helped to create in the first place. Another way to look at the matter is this: we always actively use spoken and written language to create or build the world of activities and institutions around us. However, thanks to the workings of history and culture, we often do this in, more or less, routine ways. These routines make activities and institutions, like committees and committee meetings, seem to exist apart from language and action in the here and now. Nonetheless, these activities and institutions have to be rebuilt continuously and actively in the here and now. This is what accounts for change, transformation, and the power of language-in-action in the world.

We continually and actively build and rebuild our worlds not just through language, but through language used in tandem with actions, interactions, non-linguistic symbol systems, objects, tool, technologies, and distinctive ways of thinking, valuing, feeling, and believing. Sometimes what we build is quite similar to what we have built before; sometimes it is not. But language-in-action is always and everywhere and active building process.

Whenever we speak or write, we always and simultaneously construct or build six things or six areas of “reality”:

1. The meaning and value of aspects of the material world: I enter a plain, square room, and speak and act in a certain way (e.g. like someone about to run a meeting), and, low and behold, where I sit becomes the “front” of the room.
2. Activities: we talk and act in one way and we are engaged in formally opening a committee meetings’ we told and act in another way and we are engaged in “chit-chat” before the official start of the meeting.
3. Identities and relationships: I talk and act in one way one moment and I am speaking and acting as “chair” of the committee; the next moment I speak and talk in a different way and I am speaking and acting as one peer/colleague speaking to another.
4. Politics (the distribution of social goods): I talk and act in such a way that a visibly angry male in a committee meeting (perhaps it’s me!) is “standing his ground on principle,” but a visibly angry female is “hysterical.”
5. Connections: I talk and act so as to make, what I am saying here and now in this committee meeting about whether we should admit more minority students connected to or relevant to (or, on the other hand, not connected to or relevant to) what I said last week about my fears of losing my job given the new government’s, turn to the right.
6. Semiotics (what and how different symbol systems and different forms of knowledge “count”): I talk and act so as to make the knowledge and language of lawyers relevant (privileged), or not, over “everyday language” or over “non-lawyerly academic language” in our committee discussion of facilitating the admission of more minority students.

In general, there are two types of meaning that I argued, in the book written by James Paul Gee, he attaches to words and phrases in actual use: situated meanings and cultural models. After a brief review of these two notions, he turned to a discussion of an important and related property of language, a property he called “reflexivity.” That was the “magical” property of language, which he discussed at the outset of the former chapters, in virtue of which language-in-use both creates and reflects the contexts in which it is used.

A situated meaning, as we saw, is an image or pattern that we assemble “on the spot” as we communicate in a given context, based on our construal of that context and on our past experiences (Barsalou 1991, 1992; Clark 1996; Hofstadter 1997; Kress 1996; Kress and van Leeuwen 1996). Here I will give two utterances: “The coffee spilled, get a mop”; “The coffee spilled, get a broom”. In the first case, triggered by the word “mop” in the context, you assemble either a situated meaning something like “grains that we make our coffee from” or like “beans from which we grind coffee.” Of course, in a real context, there are many more signals as how to go about assembling situated meanings for words and phrases.

Situated meanings don’t simply reside in individual minds; very often they are negotiated between people in and through communicative social interaction. Here is an example. Someone in a relationship says “I think good relationships shouldn’t take work.” A good mutually negotiating (directly, or indirectly through inferencing) what “work” is going to mean for the people concerned, in this specific context, as well as in the larger context of their ongoing relationship. Furthermore, as conversations and indeed, relationships, develop, participants continually revise their situated meanings.

Words like “work” and “coffee” seem to have more general meanings than are apparent in the sorts of situated meanings we have discussed so far. This is because words are also associated with what, say, “cultural models.” Cultural models are “storylines,” families of connected images (like a mental movie), or (informal) “theories” shared by people belonging to specific social or cultural groups (D’Andrade and Strauss 1992; Holland and Quinn 1987).

Cultural models “explain,” relative to the standards of the group, why words have the various situated meaning they do and fuel their ability to grow more. Cultural models are usually not completely stored in any one person’s head. Rather, they are distributed across the different sorts of “expertise” and viewpoints found in the group (Hutchins 1995; Shore 1996), much like a ploy a story or pieces of a puzzle that different people have different bits of and which they can potentially share in order to mutually develop the “big picture.”

The cultural model connected to “coffee,” for example, is, for some of us, something like: berries are picked (somewhere? from some sort of plant?) and then prepared (how?) for other foods. Different types of coffee, drunk in different ways, have different social and cultural implications, for example, in terms of status. This is about the entire model I know, the rest of it (I trust) is distributed elsewhere in the society should I need it.

Cultural models link to each other in complex ways to create bigger and bigger storylines. Such linked networks of cultural models help organize the thinking and social practices of sociocultural groups. For example, taking a more consequential example than “coffee,” say, some people use a cultural model for raising young children that runs something like this (Harkness, Super, and Keeper 1992): Children are born dependent on their parents and then they go through various stages during which they often engage in disruptive behaviors in pursuit of their growing desire for independence.

This cultural model, which integrates models for children, child-rearing, stages, development, and independence, as well as others, helps parents explain their children’s behavior in terms of a value the group holds (e.g. independence). It is continually revised and developed (consciously and unconsciously) in interaction with others in the group, as well as through exposure to various books and other media. Other social groups view children differently (Philips 1974): for example, as beings who start out as too unsocialized and whose disruptive behaviors are not so much need for greater socialization within the family, i.e. for less independence (less “selfishness”).

From the discussion above, we can easily draw the conclusion, that is, discourse analysis is divided into five categories: structural analysis, cognitive analysis, social cultural analysis, critical analysis and synthetic analysis. Social cultural analysis regards discourse as interactional activities and emphasizes the social function of language. This method can not only analyze word and sentence expression form and meaning, but also analyze all kinds of social cultural factors related to discourse. The speaker, as an individual and one entity of a society, not only wants to transmit information or expresses thoughts, but also attempts to engage in certain social activities in different social situations and social institutions. Most discourse analysis concentrates on form, meaning, interaction and cognition, while social cultural analysis emphasizes the function of context besides the above-mentioned.

REFERENCES

- [1] Brown, Gillian. and George Yule (1983). *Discourse Analysis*. Cambridge University Press.
- [2] Coulthard, Malcolm. (1985). *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis*. Burnt Mill, Harlow: Longman. New Edition.
- [3] Barsalou, L.W. (1991). Deriving categories to achieve goals. In G. H. Bower (Ed.), *The psychology of learning and motivation: Advances in research and theory* (Vol. 27, pp.1-64). New York: Academic Press.
- [4] Barsalou, L.W. (1992). *Cognitive psychology: An overview for cognitive scientists*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- [5] Clark, H. H. (1996). *Using language*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- [6] Cutting, Joan. (2002). *Pragmatics and Discourse: a resource book for students*. London and New York: Routledge.
- [7] D’Andrade, R. & Strauss, C. (Eds.). (1992). *Human motives and cultural models*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University

- Press.
- [8] Gee, James Paul. (2000). *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis: Theory and Method*. London: Routledge.
 - [9] Georgakopoulou, Alexandra. and Dionysis Goutsos (1997). *Discourse Analysis: an Introduction*. Edinburgh University Press.
 - [10] Harkness, S., Super, C. M. & Keeper, C. H. (1992). Learning how to be an American parent: How cultural models gain directive force. In R. D'Andrade & C. Strauss (Eds.), *Human motives and cultural models* (PP. 163-178). Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
 - [11] Hofstadten, D. R. (1997). *Le ton beau de Marol: In praise of the music of language*. New York: Basic Books.
 - [12] Holland, D. & Quinn, N. (Eds.). (1987). *Cultural Models in language and thought*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
 - [13] Hutchby, Ian. And Robin Wooffitt (1998). *Conversation Analysis: Principles, Practices and Applications*. Oxford & Cambridge: Polity Press.
 - [14] Hutchins, E. (1995). *Cognition in the wild*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
 - [15] Johnstone, Barbara. (2001). *Discourse Analysis*. Oxford: Blackwell.
 - [16] Kress, G. (1996). *Before writing: Rethinking paths into literacy*. London: Routledge.
 - [17] Kress, G. & Van Leeuwen, T. (1996). *Reading images: The grammar of visual design*. London: Routledge.
 - [18] Nunan, David. (1993). *Introducing Discourse Analysis*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books.
 - [19] Philips, S. U. (1974) *The invisible culture*. New York: Teachers College Press.
 - [20] Shore, B. (1996). *Culture in mind: Cognition, culture, and the problem of meaning*. New York: Oxford University Press.
 - [21] Verschueren, Jef. (1998). *Understanding Pragmatics*. London: Edward Arnold.
 - [22] Yule, George. (1996). *Pragmatics*. Oxford University Press.

Hongzhi Wu was born in Xinshao, Hunan Province, China in 1975. He received his M.A. degree in Linguistics and Applied Linguistics in Foreign Languages from University of Science and Technology of China in 2001.

He is currently an instructor in the School of Foreign Languages, Qingdao University of Science and Technology, Qingdao, China. His research interests include Language Testing, Sociolinguistics, and Intercultural Communication.

Mr. Wu is a member of the Chinese Association of Foreign Language Teachers.