

THE CONCEPT OF DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

What relates Discourse Analysis (DA) to discourse? The idea is that the former studies the letter. But, the depth of knowledge of the relatedness between the two notions is essential to grasp the nature of both. This paper attempts to review what DA sets out to do in the study of discourse. The ultimate purpose of language use boils down to discourse which is considered the unit of human communication. In discourse, the linguistic and extra-linguistic mechanisms are essentially at play, and as a result of this interplay, it provides some answers to many of our questions on the mystery of meaning in human communication.

The Concept of DA

Zellig Harris (1952) is often viewed as the first scholar to introduce DA as the way analyzing connected speech and writing. One of the significant observations made in the course of study is that:

...connected discourse occurs within a particular situation... whether of a person speaking, or of a conversation, or someone sitting down occasionally over the period of months to write a kind of book in a particular literary or scientific tradition.

With this definition, one may conceive DA as the study of language in use beyond linguistic forms namely: words, phrases, and sentences. DA studies the relationship between language and the social and cultural contexts of use. And, as well, it considers the different views and different understandings of the use of language present in the same or different situations. (Paltridge, 2006).

The discourse which is the object of DA is generally viewed as ‘connected linguistics constructions (Phrases sentences etc.) whether in the spoken form (i.e conversational exchange) or written form (i.e written texts). In short any unit of communication has the property of discourse. A unit of communication or phrase is however not always a single complete sentence. In conversational exchange, we often speak in single words, phrases, and fragments of sentences (Akmajian, A. et,al 1980). Consider the following dialogue between speakers (A and B) at their first meeting in a certain street in which participant ‘A’ is Igbo, a non-native Hausa speaker and ‘B, a native Hausa speaker:

- A: kai! Innaa ne kofa Alu Jedo?
(Hey! Where is Alu Jedo gate?)
B: [frowns at ‘A’ turns his face off without saying a word]

From the above, it can be discerned that, there are at least two problems from A's speech act:

- i) Linguistic, having to do with the phonetic and phonological and perhaps morphological component too;
- ii) Sociolinguistics, -having to do with the A's social aspect of speech acting.

Now, which of these may have been the cause of B's negative response to A's question? In fact, the linguistic problems (i.e. grammatical) can hardly be the cause. Such can be tolerated. However, the sociolinguistic mishandlings by 'A' could be the real cause. The reason is that the context of the dialogue does not permit the use of 'kai!' (Hey!) as an appropriate opening remark by 'A'. The feature lacking in A's act is politeness which 'kai!' utterance does not convey. Its use here violates one of the socio-cultural norms that the Hausa speakers expect in such a situation. The 'kai!' remark is otherwise used acceptably in one of the following situations: (i) Where the addresser and addressee are of equal status (ii) where familiarity between the participants overrides politeness and (iii) where the addresser is superior in some respect to the addressee.

Our day-to-day talks exchange in different forms of conversation is full of such acts in which appropriateness depends partly on socio-cultural situations (sociolinguistic) and partly on grammar (linguistic) Mey (2001:99), introduces the contextual conditions of speech acting which he describes as the 'social framework' in which a speech act has to be performed in order to be valid. According to Mey, the social framework involves not only the 'co-text' of utterance but the entire fabric of interaction known as the context. Co-text is viewed as the various mechanisms determining people's use of language, for example, who holds the flow, what kinds of rules are there for taking turns, yielding or holding the floor in interaction, what makes a particular point in conversation qualify for a turn, and the like. Context on the other hand, encompasses aspects beyond such mechanisms to the overall socially relevant circumstances that surround the production of language, such as the extra-linguistic actions that caused the talks or conversation. Such socially relevant circumstances that surround the production of language in a written or a spoken act of communication are the feature properties of discourse that DA sets out to study among other things.

As can be seen from the proceeding discussion one unique issue in DA is the examination of cultural ways in which language is used, which is, According to Hyme (1964) the '*ethnography of communication*'. Under this notion, there are particular cultural ways for, say, '*buying and selling*' things in different cultural settings. In every cultural situation, therefore, there are unique non-linguistic behaviors that the language users display and the rules that they follow which characteristically differ across cultures. Such behaviors and rules are some of the major objects of study in DA. Moving from the general concept of DA, there are certain different scholarly views of DA which must be borne in my mind when seeking proper understanding of the subject. Here is a review of some important ones.



DIFFERENT VIEWS OF DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Views of DA differ with the different background of researchers. For instance, within a relatively short period of its inception in linguistics, the term DA has shifted from highlighting one aspect of language to another (Fairclough, 2000 and Mills, 1997). Cazden (1998), introduces two main views of DA, those devoted to analyses of stretches of naturally occurring language, and those which focus attention on different ways of talking and understanding. According to Fairclough (2003), there is a contrast between what may be called textually oriented DA and what is considered to be a more social theoretical orientation of the term. He does not look at these two views as ‘*mutually exclusive*’;. Instead, he argues for an analysis of discourse featuring both linguistic and social characteristics. It is also the view of Cameron and Kulick (2003). Both emphasize on the interpretation of discourses regarding their social meanings and functions. A more comprehensive view perhaps would be the one associated with language in actual use. People use language to achieve various communicative goals; perform communicative acts, participate in certain communicative events, present themselves to each other, communicate within particular groups and societies and, with other groups and cultures. More important still, they do things beyond pure language use(i.e. using language to convey ideas, beliefs, feelings and values) (Paltridge, 2006). All of these are incorporated in the view of DA.

SPOKEN AND WRITTEN DISCOURSES

As earlier pointed out, the notion of discourse is quite central to discourse analysis. Discourses differ as to whether they are spoken or written. Biber (1986, 1988) lists some common feature differences between spoken and written discourse. Although the features presented are true to some spoken and written genres, they are particularly not to others. All the feature differences relate to the inherent differences existing between the spoken and written language, and such differences are borne by features as grammatical intricacy, lexical density nominalization, explicitness, contextualization, spontaneity; repetition hesitation and redundancy which are measured in comparing the two genres thus:

Grammatical Intricacy

One area of difference between spoken and written discourse is structural complexity. Spoken discourse is considered less structurally complex and less elaborate than the written discourse. Perhaps the most notable aspect of the difference is the level of organization. The styles of organization between the two genres differ and often look as if written discourses are more highly organized. However, it can be argued that spoken discourse has its own kind of complexity. Halliday (1968), speaks of the notion of grammatical intricacy to support his argument that spoken discourse is also highly organized. In this, he observes that clauses in spoken discourse are much more spread out and with more complex relations than in written discourse. It may be as a result of the discrete nature by which speech is produced (Paltridge, 2006).

Lexical Density

Lexical density means the calculated ratio of content words to grammatical or function words. Content words constitute such categories as nouns, verbs, and adjectives, while function words are prepositions, pronouns, determiners and the like that form the skeleton of a sentence. In spoken discourse, content words are more stacked together in individual clauses than they are in written discourse. This fact could be verified in almost every piece of written and spoken discourse.

Nominalization

High level of nominalization is a characteristic feature of written discourse. It is what Halliday (1969) refers to as '*grammatical metaphor*'. It is an instance of transfer of grammatical items from a more expected category to another; for example, from a verb to noun etc. it is easily recognized by the distribution of elements in the sentence. The notion of nominalization also extends to the frequent occurrence of polysyllabic noun-forms, which is a phenomenon often associated with written genres. Spoken discourses have fewer polysyllabic nouns and fewer instances of grammatical metaphors.

Explicitness

Although it may seem a commonly held view that the feature of explicitness is more of a written than spoken language, there is no practical evidence to make it strictly so. Some factors are responsible for non-absoluteness of this feature. For instance, one may be direct or indirect in either their speech or written depending on their communicative purpose. A speaker may wish his/her listener to infer just as a writer may wish his/her reader to do same. At times, both may choose to be direct.

Contextualization

A spoken discourse is often based on the perception that speech depends on a shared situation and background for interpretation. Tannen (1982), speaks of the shared situation and background as more applicable to conversation than speech. Written discourse does not show any high dependence on a shared context. However, both written fictions and non written fictions may depend on the background information supplied by the writer. While the interpretation of both written and spoken discourses, more or less, depends on the background information, it would be argued that '*contextualization*' is centrally crucial to CA Paltridge (2006.16).

Spontaneity

Spoken discourse takes up the characteristics of speech which is by nature spontaneous. The kind of organization found in spoken discourse is quite different from that of the written one. The process of speech production is observed as a speaker speaks. Thus, speech is full of reformulated utterances, after-thoughts, and half-completed comments, etc. The view that speaking is more ungrammatical and disorganized than writing is perhaps due to misunderstandings of the kind of organizations and grammar of the spoken discourse. Written

discourse too is at some stage half-completed and disorganized in its own ways. With spoken discourse, the grammar and organization follow up the flow of speech, and there is a let-in of change of topics, interruptions, and overlaps of speakers as they interact with each other. Other things peculiar to spoken discourse that are not found in written discourse, for instance, speakers can use intonation and gesture to convey meanings.

Repetition, Hesitation and Redundancy

Other features peculiar to speech such as repetition, hesitation, and redundancy also contribute to the difference between written and spoken discourse. Conversation is a specialized instance of spoken discourse. It is instantaneous and produced in real time with the speakers facing the challenge of thinking and speaking at the same time. Spoken discourse also exhibits certain characteristics such as pauses and the use of *'fillers'* to enable speakers to have time to think what to say next.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we have seen that DA is a method of discourse study. Because of the differences that exist between spoken and written discourses, though practically not often absolute, there are variations in DA's approach of the two. Despite the variation in the approach, the underlying method is almost the same. According to McCarthy (2001), there is no one-dimensional difference between spoken and written discourse. The differences should be measured only on a two-end scale, going from the level of a more interpersonal use of language (i.e conversation) to the level of texts, which are more detached, e.g., some written public notices.

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