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**DISCUSSING DISCOURSE**

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**Abstract**

The use of language is of paramount importance in communication and maintenance of human society. Language is used for many purposes at different places and times. It is also used in different media like speech and writing among others. This paper examines series of explorations in the analysis of discourse. Such a process looks into the process of examining and analysing language in use so as to cover their underlying meanings, power dynamics, and social implications. In this paper, language has been seen as a discourse which deals with the co-occurrence of two or more interlocutors. Furthermore, it has to do with conversational ability beyond sentence to sequence of discourse. The main focus of his paper therefore is the exploration of the use of discourse on a functional basis and how such can be analysed, This is together with the linguistic resources in addition to the utilization of the pragmatic context of situation.

**Keyword:** language, discourse, Speech Acts, implicature, context,

**Introduction**

Language is a veritable tool in human society and in this work, language is seen as a discourse which is usually studied or analysed. In this paper, when we talk about Discourse analysis, we are making reference to a linguistic approach that focuses on language in use by touching on the social as well as the cultural contexts of communication. A functional approach to discourse analysis views language as a tool for creating and negotiating meanings in social contexts. Language, no doubt, is the medium through which human beings become a personality sequel to his membership of the society and the roles they play there. The use of language or discourse is therefore of paramount importance in human society. Perhaps it is proper for us to look into some literature of discourse analysis.

Very many writers have explained the meaning of Discourse analysis which is a linguistic approach that examines language in use. As hinted earlier, the focus is on the social as well as cultural contexts of human communicative interaction. It is a tool for creating and negotiating meaning in different social contexts. van Dijk 2020 and Paltridge 2022 have done quite a good number of works in this area. Discourse therefore has to do with conversational ability or connected speech or writing which

consists of more than one sentence. According to Ogunsiji (1991), discourse is applicable to well-formulated or coherently arranged series of a subject in writing or speaking. Just as one has the ability to recognize a sentence as grammatical or ungrammatical, so one has the ability to recognize a series of sentences as discourse rather than arbitrary list. Therefore, in discourse, there is the 'co-occurrence of two or more interlocutors related to each other in a particular way about a particular topic in a particular setting' (Giglioli 1972). Firth (1935), the father of systematic linguistics, was the first to urge linguists to study language from the conversational point of view. To him, it is in conversation we will find the key to what language is and how it works. Today, the problem of communication is being studied from multi-disciplinary point of view and discourse analysis is not just unidirectional, it is also multi-dimensional since it deals with language in various conceptual variables. A variety of language can be used in a specific context like formal and informal way like register. A type of text or discourse can be general such as a narrative or an argument; it can also involve a group of people who share a common language, culture or values.

Coulthard (1977) has also observed that one does not have to look at the rules of discourse as items that can be learnt in some incremental list of words structures or even simulated events where



one rehearses what he has heard. Rather, the meaning of communication strategies has to be negotiated. When we converse as human beings, we are trying to send out certain meanings to our hearer(s) and it is the role of descriptive linguistics to bring out this meaning to us. Language is fundamentally a way of behaving and making others behave; as a result of this, linguistics must have serious concern for the verbal process in the context of situation. This is to tell us that language is only meaningful in its context of situation and the aim of any linguistic description is how the utterances are meaningful in any context of situation. The underlying competence of a language cannot be studied by introspection and intention, discourses have to be negotiated and it will be difficult to interpret a language unless one enters into it. Discourse analysis is concerned with the appropriateness; it is a cline; it is also flexible and as such, we have to bear it in mind that we cannot base utterances on grammaticality only. We cannot describe grammar in isolation from meaning and context. Therefore, the discourse of language is intricately related to those functions language is used to perform. It is largely supra-sentential which has much to do with the functional use of language, it must be able to distinguish what is done from what is said.

According to Hymes (1972), the unit of discourse is the speech act which represents a level distinct from the sentence and not identifiable with any single portion of other level of grammar not with segment of any particular size defined in terms of other levels of grammar. The unit of discourse is larger than clause or sentence but there has been disagreement over the basic unit. Some analysts regard the utterances as the basic unit while others like Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) prefer a smaller unit which they call 'move'. However, it depends on the purpose of the analyst. Whether the term 'utterance' or 'move' is used, they both represent discourse unit. It is the concern of Discourse analysis to look into the rules of language with a view to describing how social acts perform different actions in different contexts.

### The Nature and Scope of Discourse

Generally, discourse refers to language in use, beyond individual sentences or words. It encompasses many variables like the social, cultural and contextual aspects of communication which includes written or spoken language, social relationships as well as power dynamics, cultural norms and values as well as contextual factors like time, place and situations, among others. Since language is used to perform many actions, Discourse Analysis performs the following: constructing meaning, creating social identities, establishing relationships, exercising power and control, reflecting and reshaping cultural norms. Discourse can be verbal i.e. spoken or written; Non-verbal i.e. gestures, facial expressions and body language; Visual (images, symbols and signs). Apart from these, Discourse can also be formal (Official, academic, professional); informal (conversational, social media); institution (government, education, media); cultural (traditional, ritualistic or artistic). See also Mey, 2008; Jombadi & Jombadi, 2020.

Discourse is therefore a crucial concept in understanding how language influences and reflects society, culture as well as

individual experiences. This work has dealt mainly with the conversational aspects of the concept under study, examples cited here are mainly conversational. Conversational discourse can include face-to-face interactions, phone calls, video conferencing, social media messaging and on-line forums. The characteristics of such discourse include informal tone, spontaneous language use, turn-taking and dialogue, use of colloquialism and slang, contextual references, emotional expression and empathy and repair mechanism like clarifying and correcting.

Pride and Holman(1972) observe that when we make conversational discourse, series of functions can be performed and these include social bonding and the building of relationship; information exchange and sharing; emotional support and empathy; conflict resolution; identity construction as well as community building. In conversational discourse, there are some features that can be of help and these include the use of pronoun and address terms like 'I', 'you', 'we'. Also, we have discourse markers like 'um', 'ah', 'you know' and so on. Others are fillers and pauses, overlapping speeches, interruptions, laughs and humours, active listening and feedback. Building and maintaining social relationships as well as other conversational features can be carried out in the analysis of discourse.

### The Early Analysis of Discourse

As a branch of sociolinguistics that interacts language and society, Discourse analysis also interacts with context as well as situation which are very paramount. Scholars like J.R. Firth will always be remembered in this discipline. Mitchell and Harris were the disciples of Firth who had been influenced by his works. While Harris worked on written discourse, Mitchell worked on spoken discourse. It was Mitchell (1975) who really worked in the Firthian tradition. In this tradition, he tried to specify the relevant element of situation as well as relevant participants in details. He worked on "The Language of Buying and Selling in Cyrenaica, 1975". According to Mitchell (1975: 165), 'the business of language...is to express thoughts, emotions, to convey information, to influence behavior in others, to act as a tool, to cooperative action and so on'.

With these at the back of Mitchell's mind, he based the buying and selling process in Cyrenaica in five different stages:

- (a) salutation - which is the beginning of the proceeding usually accompanied with the creation of rapport at least between the buyer and the seller;
- (b) enquiry as to object of sale which also involves two people;
- (c) investigation of the object of sale which also involves two people;
- (d) bargaining - this is also between the buyer and the seller until an agreement is reached;
- (e) conclusion - this one may involve the final tone of the participants or even both.

These stages are not isolated on linguistic criteria; they are simply defined by the kind of activity that is appropriate to them. Thus, format used by Mitchell was not a sacrosanct one but it showed that Mitchell tried to show the different participants involved and the role they played. Format of analysis may be different from

individuals because what goes on in the discourse is the choice of options and these options will make the utterance to progress smoothly. There is no doubt that language is poly-systemic and various analysts can use different options insofar as the message is put across.

### The Functional Basis of Discourse

Human language is essentially functional in the sense that it is used to perform various functions in the society. Therefore, since discourse is an aspect of language use in practice, whatever function language is used to perform, discourse cannot be excluded. This is because the locus of language is around discourse (Brown and Yule, 1983). Also, discourse is used to perform various social functions (Pride and Holman, 1972) and as such, the issue of language use in the society is of great importance.

As hinted earlier, our concept of discourse analysis views language as performing some vital functions relevant to the general understanding of linguistic structure. Halliday (1973) has given us some explanations about the functional basis of language. Halliday has pointed out some functions language is used to perform. Some of these are what he calls 'instrumental' function. This means the use of language for the purpose of satisfying material needs. "Regulatory" function of language which is the use of language to control other people's behaviour and to manipulate the people in the environment. Another one is 'interactional' function which is the use of language as a means of personal interaction with those around. These are very common among children and the younger ones. Among the adults, utterances tend to be functionally complex because every linguistic act tends to be serving more than a function at a time due to a wider exposure and experience. Therefore, language can be said to be poly-systemic and the choice is conditioned by context and functions. Because of different functions that language can perform at the same time, Halliday has identified and categorised language into three, all of which involve macro-functions. They are ideational function, interpersonal function and textual function.

**Ideational Function:** Under this macro-function, there are two micro functions. These are experiential and logical functions. Generally, ideational serves for the expression of content of a language event or language text. Through experiential function, the writer or speaker expresses in language, his experiences of the real world of his own consciousness. One probes the reality around one's world through the use of language. Some people have called this function 'transactional'. Logical function involves the rules of the use of language. It allows language to give structures of experience. This means that when one probes, various experiences have been gathered but they must be structured as well as arranged.

**Interpersonal Function:** Here, one is able to use language for all the specific forms of personal expression as well as social interaction. It helps us to establish and sustain social relation. It is an interactional use of language. It helps to acquire a new rapport between interlocutors.

**Textual Function:** At this point, language becomes text and it relates itself to context of use. It enables the writer/speaker to construct texts or connected passages of discourse that are situationally relevant. Without the textual component of meaning, it will be impossible to make use of language at all. So, in analysing discourse, one has to bear these functions in mind as language is used to serve those purposes.

When an exchange is made, Tsui (1989) maintains that it is perceived as consisting of potentially three elements of structures. These are initiating move, responding move and follow-up move. This means that, functionally when a discourse is made, there will be a response and follow-up will also come depending on what is being discussed. In spoken discourse, one cannot state specifically where a full pause will take place. This is because there can be incomplete markers like 'and'; 'but'; 'if'; 'however' etc. which can turn a potentially complete sentence into an incomplete one.

Another important correlate in understanding the functional analysis of discourse is what Coulthard (1977) calls 'membership'. He says that the speaker must 'membership' his listener as the discourse goes on. As the topic changes, the listener must be 're-membershiped'. During a conversation therefore, the same person can be 'membershiped' as a lawyer, doctor, teacher, gardener etc. depending on the nature, scope and type of interlocution going on. What Coulthard means by this idea of membership becomes clearer in an example of discourse between a passenger and a stewardess.

Passenger: Do you have a cigarette?

Stewardess: No, we don't.

Here, the stewardess assumes that the passenger is addressing her in her official role of a stewardess whereas, passenger 'membershiped' her as a fellow passenger in the plane.

Utterances in the telephone conversation are also another important discourse one should understand. One has to bear it in mind that the idea of 'hello' which comes before further speech on the telephone is not a greeting. It can be seen as an answer to the summons which the caller has embodied in the ringing of the phone. After the answering of this summon, then comes greetings, change of topic, production of bounding topic at the end of the conversation. After the message had been passed across on phone, topic bounding sequence like 'O.K. thank you'; pre-closing sequence like 'O.K. dear' and then closing sequence like 'Bye' can follow. One thing that can come in discourse is the incomplete marker. There can again be possible introduction of new topics after the pre-closing sequence.

A: O.K., thank you very much

B: O.K. dear

A: Oh, by the way, I'd like to ask you .....

So here, the discourse will continue again. That is why in spoken discourse, one cannot give a precise length or structure on meaning of what is being discussed or talked about.

Also, when speech is made, one should be able to recognize meaningful and meaningless strings of sentences. One important aspect of this function is the introduction of the notion - Cohesion and Coherence particularly seen in the relation of one sentence to the other whether spoken or written. Cohesion is a matter of the contextual appropriacy of a linguistic form. According to Halliday and Hassan (1976), cohesion occurs when the interpretation given to some elements in the discourse is dependent on that of another. This means that one pre-supposes the other and it will not be effectively decoded except by recourse to it. The following discourse shows cohesion.

- A: Well, did you talk to her?  
 B: Yes, I did.  
 A: When did she say the car will be brought?  
 B: Tomorrow.  
 A: Fine, I'll meet her at the shop.  
 B: She said that her husband will bring it.

The exchange here shows that speaker A's question takes on a form which indicates what he needed to know and B's replies organise the information he had to impart so as to satisfy A's need. Thus, the propositions expressed by A are linked up with those of B to form a continuous propositional development. We can then say that the form of the utterances of A and B are contextually appropriate and so, their exchange is cohesive. Generally, propositions are organized in such a way that what is known or given comes first in the sentence and what is unknown or new comes second. The following two sentences do not form a cohesive unit.

- A: What did the rain do?  
 B: The crops were destroyed.

This is because B's sentence arranges the propositional information in such a way as to suggest a gap between the two sentences. To make the discourse cohesive, we have to do some addition to either A's sentence or that of B. For example:

- A: What did the rain do?  
 B: It destroyed the crops.

One has to note that the pronoun 'it' has taken on the value of rain in this context. In other words, cohesion can be described in terms of the formal link between sentences and their parts. This means that cohesion is usually overtly signalled. Certain fact about the English language already known enables us to recognize propositional link quite easily. The link can be anaphoric, cataphoric or homophoric.

In the case of coherence, it is partly based on the interconnections with the texts that had been partly on the mind of the reader or hearer who constantly relates the text to its 'extra-textual situation'. Halliday and Hassan (1976) regard coherence as arising from cohesion among others. In coherence, we can therefore infer the covert propositional connection from an interpretation of the elocutionary act. Example:

- A: That is the telephone  
 B: I'm in the baths

A: O.K.

To make sense of the above interchange, that is to recognize it as coherent instance of discourse, we try and envisage a situation in which the uttering of A's first remark will be understood as constituting request. The first remark of A is therefore not an interrogative but a declarative one. Also, in isolation, the proposition expressed by this sentence cannot be taken on any particular communicative value. Ordinarily in other situation, it might count as a number of other speech acts. For example, it can be an identification warning, etc. The reason why we give the value of a request here is that we recognize the way in which it relates to the other part of the exchange. The context suggests this to us. So, given these suggestions, the discourse can be expanded thus in its analysis to show its coherence.

- A: That is the telephone (can you answer it?)  
 B: I'm in the baths (So, I can't answer the call)  
 A: O.K. (I will go and answer it)

Taken together, B's remark can be a reply to A and as having the communicative value of excuse for not complying with A's request. We also recognize A's second remark as an undertaking to answer the call since A has given an excuse that is tenable.

In utterances like this and in any other utterances, there is the need for shared knowledge in conversation. This shared knowledge is not only the shared rule for interpretation of linguistic items but shared knowledge of the world to which a speaker can allude or appeal.

## Conclusion

Language is considered as an organic phenomenon. Apart from being a form of human behaviour, it is also a form of social behaviour. According to Trudgill (1974), the function of language in establishing social relationship and the role played by language in conveying information are partly the major concern of language behaviour. So, whenever language is used to perform various functions, such functions can be analyzed and interpreted. Using functional approach in discourse analysis, one would be able to see the actual pragmatic roles language is used to perform. In such analysis, the appropriacy of an utterance is the focus. This is because interaction can only succeed when an utterance has a pragmatic and functional uptake. A functional approach to language provides a comprehensive framework for understanding language use in social contexts. By examining language as a tool for communication, we can gain insights into social relationships, power dynamics, and cultural norms.

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