Discourse Studies

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Abstract

In Discourse Studies, discourse is typically seen as a social practice of participants communicating through linguistic and other semiotic resources in certain contexts. Researchers in this field often insist on the constitutive character of discourse for social realities, structures and subjectivities. This article discusses both discourse theories (e.g., poststructuralist, deliberative, critical realist strands) as well as the more empirical approaches in discourse analysis (e.g., semantic and pragmatic, qualitative and quantitative strands). Special mention is made of developments in the West, notably in France and the UK, where Discourse Studies first started to emerge around 1970.

Introduction

In the last 50 years, ‘discourse’ has become a key notion in the interdisciplinary debate on the social sciences and humanities. Researchers who deal with discourse typically investigate the ways in which social realities are constructed through communicative practices. While many researchers who refer to discourse in their disciplines share an interest in language, communication, and meaning-making as central problems in contemporary society, ‘discourse’ is increasingly becoming the common denominator of a new, transdisciplinary field: Discourse Studies.

Discourse Studies has progressed as a reaction to developments both inside and outside the academic domain. Thus, developments of great topical relevance have accompanied the emergence of Discourse Studies: discrimination against social groups in the mass media, market-based modes of governing large populations, postnational regimes of exclusion in global postmodernity, the crisis of representation in culture and politics, and new technologies of surveillance and control.

If linguists with a social sciences background have, crucially, contributed to this field, many discourse researchers come from other fields in the social sciences and humanities (e.g., sociology, political science, history, philosophy, literary criticism, geography, education, economics, psychology, etc.). Established in France in the late 1960s and in the UK in the 1970s, Discourse Studies is today growing rapidly in many parts of the world, notably in Latin America and in China.

In Discourse Studies, researchers typically mobilize analytical and theoretical resources from the entire spectrums of the social sciences and humanities in order to account for the social production of meaning. Situated within the transdisciplinary space of language and society, Discourse Studies overlaps with a number of other fields such as pragmatics, sociolinguistics, semiotics, rhetoric, conversation analysis, linguistic anthropology, philosophy/sociology and so on of language. Among the characteristic features of discourse research, one can detect a focus on these questions:

- **Discourse as a sociohistorical meaning-making practice in context.** Meaning is not inherent in the signs, utterances or other semiotic resources that discourse participants use to communicate with each other. It is a product of linguistic and communicative practices whose meaning is inextricably tied to their contexts, material mediums, physical settings and participating bodies in and through which discursive practices occur.

- **The societal relevance of themes and topics.** While discourses can cover a wide range of domains, they often touch on questions and problems of special societal relevance, notably the existential moral and political questions of larger communities. Discourses tend to deal with knowledge circulating across many different contexts, mobilizing considerable resources and power and established through social institutions. Thus they often have an impact beyond the local and specific contexts in meaning-making activities that take place.

- **The discursive construction of subjectivity.** Even though discourse is considered to be a social practice, it does not presuppose that the discourse participants are always free to say and think what they want. On the contrary, their discursive practice is subject to rules and constraints which they do not always control. While discourse typically exceeds what they mean to say, think, or do, they become subjects only by entering discourse. Subjects, actors or agents are, themselves, a discursive effect of discourse, and not its origin.

- **Discourse as constitutive of the social.** From a discourse point of view, social structures are produced by meaning-making activities involving the use of language. At the same time, discursive practices are shaped by social structures. Discursive practices not only represent the social world but, in certain cases, they also constitute it – think of the act of ordering a beer in a pub, which creates rather than describes the relationship between customer and bar man, or the publication of statistics on smoking patterns, which can make a social problem real and objective for society.

While, in a most general sense, discourse deals with the social production of meaning, its meaning can vary: from discourse as text-based communication in large communities (especially among discourse researchers from Europe) to discourse as situated talk or turn-taking process in a setting (especially among discourse researchers from North America). The problems of discourse researchers can vary according to their disciplinary background: while linguistic discourse researchers usually want to go beyond the abstract – pure, internalist conceptions of language of classical structural or Chomskyan linguistics – sociologists and political scientists have turned to discourse in order to point out the symbolic construction of actors and ‘reality.’ Even though Discourse
Discourse Studies, just like sociolinguistics, has long been a subfield of linguistics, it is now becoming a transdisciplinary field at the crossroads of language and society, one which mobilizes theories and methods from all corners of the social sciences and humanities in order to study the ways in which linguistic, semantic, and communicative resources and practices are mobilized in social communities to represent and constitute social phenomena (such as subjectivities and identities, relationships and structures, hegemonies and ideologies).

To account for the development of Discourse Studies in the last 50 years, this article will concentrate on (1) strands of (a) discourse theory and (b) discourse analysis and discuss (2) Discourse Studies as a global field.

**Discourse Studies as Theory and Analysis**

Discourse Studies is organized around characteristics split between two ideal-typical strands: one focussing on discourse as an intellectual and epistemological problem of social, political and cultural theory, the other on the analytical and methodological challenges of studying discourse as a material and empirical object (Angermuller et al., 2014b). Even though the term 'discourse analysis' is often claimed by both groups, one might suggest reserving ‘discourse theory’ for the former and ‘discourse analysis’ for the latter. If Discourse Studies has precisely emerged from the productive encounter of both theory and analysis, this distinction may help to explain some of the obstacles that have prevented the exchange between certain researchers claiming to deal with 'discourse.'

**Discourse Theories**

Within discourse theory, one can distinguish between at least three strands: post-structuralist, normative–deliberative and critical–realist discourse theories.

- Post-structuralist discourse theory usually insists on the constitutive role of language and communication for what counts as real in a given society. Thus, if the 'speaking subject' is seen as an effect of discursive practices, discourse not only describes but to a certain degree also constitutes the social. Rather than as a closed container, the social is perceived as an open, dynamic and heterogeneous terrain of relationships. Following Saussure's primacy of difference over identity or Wittgenstein's practical turn in social theory, post-structuralist discourse theory adopts a resolutely antiessentialist stance which emphasizes the contingent character of reality and nature constructed through practices involving both power and knowledge. While a first wave of post-structuralist discourse theory, among which Michel Foucault (1972) and Michel Pêcheux (1982), helped to constitute Discourse Studies in France, a second wave, also known as (French) Theory, resulted from the reception of 'Continental' thinkers (i.e., mainly from France such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, Louis Althusser, Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari and to a lesser degree from Germany such as Friedrich Nietzsche, Walter Benjamin, Martin Heidegger, Theodor W. Adorno) in the Anglo-American world, where it has contributed to the formation of cultural studies (Hall, 2003), postcolonialism (Spivak, 1988; Said, 1978), the theory of hegemony (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985), queer studies (Butler, 1990), and psychoanalytical theory (Zizek, 1989).

- For normative–deliberative theories, discourse designates the negotiation of an agreement between participants who enter discourse in order to overcome a conflict while pursuing certain interests and objectives. Discourse in this sense usually involves free deliberation in the public sphere over what can be considered good and acceptable for all. According to this perception, the discourse participants need to come to terms with clashing norms in discourse. For the ‘strong’ program of normative–deliberative discourse theory, spelled out by third-generation critical theorists such as Jürgen Habermas (1985), certain communicative laws and normative standards are inherent in discourse which make certain claims more true, rational, and acceptable, whatever the social or political resources of those who make them. Weaker versions are typically critical of the universalism of the strong program and reject the idea of a normative point zero in discourse. They see hierarchies of values as discursive constructions of those who are concerned with social and political problems or as a contingent result of the communicative operations in an autopoietic system. Thus, Lyotard insists on certain unresolvable tensions and contradictions (différend) in discourse that can make rational agreement impossible (1983).

- While post-structuralist and normative–deliberative discourse theorists are firmly situated within the constructivist social sciences and humanities, some discourse theorists, who have defended a moderate realism, consider discourse to be a social practice embedded in given power structures. In this way, critical realist discourse theorists point to the objective social constraints in which discursive practices are embedded. Through discourse, unequal relationships are produced and reproduced between larger social groups, classes, or communities. Critical realist discourse theories usually have an affinity with macrosociological theories of social and cultural inequality, ranging from the Marxist critique of ideology to Pierre Bourdieu's work on symbolic domination. In drawing from critical realist discourse theory, linguists have become interested in social problems in critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 1992), while Marxist sociologists (Sum and Jessop, 2013) have discovered discourse to be a constitutive dimension in the dynamics of social power.

While the common denominator of these ideal typical strands of discourse theory is the central role of language, communication, or meaning in social, political, and cultural theory, the line is not always easy to draw (Angermuller et al., 2014a). Thus, weaker versions of normative–deliberative discourse theories have often been associated with post-structuralism while Foucault's power/knowledge approach has been claimed by both post-structuralists and critical realists. The critical potential has been spelled out in all of these approaches, albeit in different ways: if the post-structuralist gesture is more epistemological, aiming at a subversive decen-tring of identities and ‘naturalized’ power, normative–deliberative discourse theories focus on the critical tensions between how discourses should operate and how they actually
do operate. Critical realism, finally, reveals the power structures hidden as it were beneath the representations produced in discourse.

In a word, discourse theories often articulate three problems: power, knowledge, and subjectivity, these are, visualized below in the discourse theory triangle. Accordingly, discourse is shaped by power structures but by representing power structures it can also contribute to objectifying and constituting them. As a socially-situated activity of producing meaning, discourse produces, establishes, and legitimizes knowledge in social groups and communities. And discourse is crucial for the construction of subjectivity as it defines, identifies, and creates actorness by attributing places and positions to those who enter discourse.

**Discourse Analyses**

While discourse theorists ask how linguistic models such as Saussure’s differentialist theory of linguistic value or Wittgenstein’s conception of ‘language game’ can inform social theory, discourse analysts deal with discourse as an empirical material object. If discourse theory has its base in social philosophy, macrosociology, or the constructivist political sciences, discourse analysis tends to have a background in linguistics or microsociological social research. To be a discourse researcher, one always needs to integrate both. However, some discourse researchers tend to be more at home on one side than the other.

From an ideal-typical perspective, analyzing a discourse usually means offering empirical insights into a socially and historically defined object (such as the ‘War on Terror’ discourse or ‘classroom discourse in French lycées’) on the basis of selected material (such as all the New York Times articles from 2000 to 2010 or the observation of classroom interactions). In discourse analysis, methodological tools are applied to selected material in order to generate empirically grounded hypotheses about the discourse at hand.

Discourse analyses do not have to follow classic research designs privileging ‘hard’ statistical methods, and they almost never believe in causalist epistemologies (“what are your dependent and independent variables?”). Discourse analysts are acutely aware of the fact that discourse is not a given object but rather partially constructed in the research process by methods and procedures which seek to account for the object. Discourse analysis in this sense mobilizes a broad range of methods, tools, and techniques which account for the uses of oral or written texts in specific contexts. Discourse analysis, therefore, does not designate a method but a cross-disciplinary field of methods and methodologies which investigate meaning making as a socially framed and situated practice.

Discourse analysis can work with quantitative or qualitative approaches, or both. Quantitative approaches usually rely on corpus analytical (‘lexicometric’ in France) methods, i.e., they deal with systematically selected and annotated textual material which is processed with the help of computer software. As a rule, quantitative tools are used for exploratory purposes to generate hypotheses about the macro-organization of a discourse which are then examined in more detail in qualitative microanalyses. If quantitative approaches usually deal with larger selections of written texts, qualitative approaches deal with smaller selections of material, written or oral, which can be handled ‘manually’ by the researcher.

Given that discourse analysis sees meaning as resulting from the interplay of texts and contexts, it must be strictly distinguished from content analysis, which views meaning as inherent in ‘texts.’ Discourse analysis, especially in its French and interactional varieties, must also be distinguished from hermeneutics in a narrow sense, understood as a subjective art of ‘understanding.’ While it places much emphasis on rationally describing the social production of meaning, discourse analysis shares the hermeneutic idea that in a wider sense, social phenomena are always meaningful. Thus, discourse analysis has a large number of tools, techniques, and procedures at its disposal which reveal the underlying rules and mechanisms of the discursive practices, resources and forms which are mobilized to realize a discourse.

A key problem of the modern social sciences and humanities discourse has been the object of many specialized approaches in the disciplines. Thus, linguists have catalogued the semiotic resources involved in discursive practices, sociologists have investigated the practical logics in discourse, anthropologists have paid special attention to settings, and so on. What makes discourse such a methodological challenge is that it is not a pure object. Discourse cannot be equated with texts, nor can it be reduced to a given context. Rather, the question is how to account for the (practical) uses that are made of language by certain people, at a given time, in a particular place. Therefore, the heterogeneous constitution of a discourse needs to be emphasized, which consists of different but interwoven ‘components’: ‘language,’ ‘practice,’ and ‘context.’ ‘Language’ comprises any repertoire of semiotic resources that can be mobilized in a discursive practice, that is, linguistic forms and expressions, words, utterances and texts, but also nonverbal signs and gestures, as well as visual, auditory, and olfactory signs; ‘practice’ denotes the practices people engage in to define their place vis-à-vis others and to coordinate their behavior. These practices can testify to their practical know-how and mobilize their resources (time, money, power, etc.); ‘context’ covers the socially defined situation or material setting in which discursive practice takes place. It can refer to the knowledge about who participates in discourse, when and where with what purpose and so on.

While these components always work together in discourse, discourse analysts sometimes prefer to take their point of departure from one angle rather than another. In this sense, ‘language-oriented’ discourse analysts, who are often but not always linguists, register linguistic or nonlinguistic material (for instance when it is shown in linguistic pragmatics how deictic expressions refer to their contexts) in order to account for how it is used in a given context. ‘Practice-oriented’ (or praxeological) discourse analysts prefer to observe what happens between actors in situations (for instance turn-taking processes in institutional talk). ‘Context-oriented’ discourse analysts focus on how material contexts (for example in an ethnographic study of intercultural communication in a setting) or on the question of how their contextual knowledge is constructed and established in discourse (for instance in a corpus analysis of the semantics of French nationhood). If each orientation starts from one angle which it takes as an empirically observable entry into discourse, discourse researchers always need to account for the other two components at least theoretically,
Discourse Studies

Discourse studies

Language

Knowledge

Practice

Context

Subtext

Power

Discourse analysis

Discourse theory

Figure 1 Discourse Studies as discourse analysis and discourse theory.

which is why they cannot always be easily distinguished. Without recognition of the articulation of all three strands, a language-oriented approach could become semiotic, a practice-oriented approach would be nothing more than conversational analysis, and a context-oriented approach might result in a mere interpretive coding of the themes and topics of a discourse. Therefore, unlike classical linguists who deal with language as an object per se, discourse researchers account for the practices employed by/in language in certain contexts. And unlike pure sociologists, they explain which practices are enacted and which knowledges are mobilized by linguistic forms. Just as discourse entails the interplay of language, practice, and context, discourse analysis involves a true cross-disciplinary perspective on the object, which is illustrated in Figure 1.

By articulating discourse theory and discourse analysis, Discourse Studies has crucially contributed to research on the social production of meaning in the social sciences. Yet it has not developed in the same linear way in all parts of the world. The currents and approaches which have received most international attention are situated for the most part in the Anglo-American world, France and Germany. According to a ‘Continental’ understanding, discourse designates written texts circulating in large communities whereas discourse as symbolic interaction taking place face-to-face is often considered to be more typical of the Anglo-American world. Linguists have played a leading role everywhere, especially in the more technical versions of discourse analysis; while discourse theorists in Europe are more likely to come from sociology, the political sciences, and philosophy, in the US they are mostly based in the cultural and literary field.

Discourse Studies as a Global Field

While Discourse Studies has recently seen dynamic growth outside the Western sphere, as a field, Discourse Studies was first established in Europe, especially in France and the UK, more so than in the US where ‘discourse’ remains a term used in a variety of specialized debates without designating a field with a common theoretical problem. Discourse Studies is probably most established in France, where it is, by and large, a subfield of linguistics, as well as in the UK and the former Commonwealth, where a number of high-profile schools are based (such as the Essex School of Hegemony and discourse analysis or the social semiotics inspired by Halliday, as well as many representatives of CDA). A large variety of journals as well as the regular recruitment of discourse researchers testify to the increasing institutional recognition that Discourse Studies enjoys in both countries.

From the beginning, Discourse Studies emerged in various countries and disciplines as the result of encounters between different traditions and schools. Today, there are no ‘national’ schools any more. Rather, in all countries there are discourse researchers who can be said to carry certain ‘national’ labels such as ‘French’ post-structuralism, ‘American’ interactionism, ‘British’ pragmatics, or ‘German’ hermeneutics. The following will give a brief overview of the major tendencies in the respective spheres.

Discourse Studies first started to develop in France, where it is known as analyse du discours, a name which goes back to an article by Zellig Harris (1952). As a field, it received seminal impulses from two theorists who started out as philosophers at the end of the 1960s, when the structuralist conjuncture in the French social sciences and humanities was drawing to a close: Michel Foucault (1972) and Michel Pêcheux (1982), the latter becoming the head of what is sometimes called the ‘French School of Discourse Analysis’ in the 1970s. In what followed, the field developed from the conjunction of the intellectual and political essence of discourse theory with two highly technical strands in discourse analysis, namely lexicometrics, which began in the early 1960s and was to give birth to a number of computer programs (such as Lexico3, Alceste, Hyperbase and so on), and text linguistics (Adam, 1999) plus the many developments in enunciative pragmatics that developed from the late 1970s onwards (in the wake of Benveniste, 1974; see Maingueneau, 1991), and which marked the end of structuralist hegemony by turning to the utterances as the smallest communicative units of discourse (Angermuller, 2014). From the beginning, French discourse linguists were joined by a number of historians (Guilhaumou et al., 1994), specialists in media and communication sciences (Charaudeau, 1983) and sociologists, who shared the emphasis that many French linguists, versed in the formalist and philological traditions of French letters, usually place on the ‘opaque materiality’ of texts. Today, with its focus on written texts, Discourse Studies in France prolongs the heritage of ‘antihumanist’ discourse theorists which linguists have put into discourse analytical practice.

Even though as a field Discourse Studies in the US is largely limited to small areas within sociolinguistics (Labov and Fanshel, 1977; Johnstone, 2008; Gumperz, 1982), corpus analysis (Biber et al., 1998), applied linguistics (Kramsch, 1998), and linguistic anthropology (following pioneers like Malinowski, 1923; Hymes, 1972; Duranti, 1997), discourse is well-known as a concept and a problem. Theoretically, ‘discourse’ is informed by the rich tradition of symbolic
interactionist and praxeological research which prolong the philosophical tradition of North American pragmatism. Symbolic interactionism, even though its name was only created after the war, draws from the work of George Herbert Mead (1967). It started with ethnographic investigations of the Chicago School and came on the scene during the 1960s and 1970s (Sacks, 1992; Cicourel, 1973; Goffman, 1981). While these theorists are better known as pioneers of the field of qualitative social research, ‘discourse’ in this context is often understood as a symbolically mediated turn-taking practice in an institutional setting, and it has loosely informed a number of developments in sociology, the political sciences and anthropology. With its strict empirical orientation recognizing the creative potential of human actors, interactionist discourse ideas are typical for microsociological strands in the social sciences whereas post-structuralist discourse theories, which started to arrive from France in the 1970s, have, by and large, been restricted to debates within the humanities.

Discourse Studies in the UK represents almost the entire spectrum of theoretical and analytical strands in Discourse Studies. Post-structuralist discourse theories (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; Hall, 1980; Rose, 1996) have developed in the political sciences and sociology whereas linguistic discourse analysis has seen contributions from sociolinguistics (Sinclair and Coulthard, 1975; Coulthard, 1977; Stubbs, 1983) as well as corpus analysis (Sinclair, 2004; Baker, 2005). Discourse Studies in the UK testifies to the intellectual presence of pragmatics in philosophy and linguistics. In philosophy, pragmatics goes back to the later Wittgenstein (2003) who, with his concept of language games points to the practical dimension of language use. Through Austin’s speech-act theory (Austin, 1962; Widdowson, 2007) and Grice’s theory of conversational maxims (Grice, 1989), pragmatic ideas have turned the linguistic debate toward discourse (Brown and Yule, 1998; Hoey, 2001; Hyland, 2005). With its insistence on social practices, Halliday’s social semiotics (Halliday, 1978; Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996) has influenced CDA (Fairclough, 1992). CDA testifies to the interest in power and inequality, which has seen similar developments elsewhere (Jäger, 2007; Reisigl and Wodak, 2009; van Dijk, 2009).

Like the UK, the German-speaking debate on discourse reflects this broad range of approaches (Angermuller, 2011; Angermuller et al., 2014b; Wrana et al., 2014a). Although German-language Discourse Studies can be viewed as a relative latecomer vis-à-vis the French and Anglo-American traditions, it is now well established across the entire social sciences and humanities. If the traditional ‘German’ discussion on discourse privileges holistic models which emphasize the richness of meaning-making activities in human culture, discourse is perceived as a space into which actors enter to reach an agreement (Habermas, 1985), as a stock of knowledge shared by all the members of a society (Keller, 2005) or in terms of collective symbols which represent organic social communities (Link, 1982). Post-structuralist approaches by contrast have been particularly interested in the discursive construction of subjectivity in neoliberalism. They have been characterized by their special emphasis on the articulation of the theoretical and methodological dimensions of discourse research (Hirschinger, 2011; Macgilchrist, 2011; Nonhoff, 2006; Wrana, 2006). Linguistic discourse researchers have prolonged pioneering research in text linguistics (Warnke, 2007) as well as in semantics (Busse, 1987; Ziemiw, 2008).

It is these four countries which have coined specific recognizable ‘styles’ which today exist as more and less hybrid representatives in all parts of the world: the focus on decentered subjectivity in ‘French’ post-structuralism, the observation of turn-taking practices in symbolic interactionism from North America, the analytical focus on language in use in ‘Anglo-Saxon’ pragmatics, and the interpretative approaches to shared meaning and heterogeneous knowledge in the German-speaking world.

Currently, Discourse Studies testifies to a great deal of heterogeneity between the disciplinary and national fields in which it is practiced. At times, discourse is merely a façade where old questions are clad in new discourse-theoretical terms. However, discourse has also been the object of a long and systematic investigation in specialized subfields in the disciplines and has now become the object of the transdisciplinary field of Discourse Studies.

See also: Corpus Linguistics; Discourse and Identity; Discourse, Anthropology of; Interactionism, Symbolic; Structuralism.

Bibliography


