

## **Introduction: Levels and Dimensions of Discourse Analysis**

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### **VARIETIES OF DESCRIPTIVE APPROACHES**

The variety of descriptive methods in discourse analysis is impressive. Whether inspired by intuitive or by more theoretical considerations about the nature of discourse, many of the disciplines in the humanities and the social sciences have developed their own approaches. Clearly, these methods are biased by the specific structures or functions, or by the kinds of discourses relevant in these disciplines. In this Introduction, we cannot do more than sketch the outlines of a unified descriptive framework, integrating the apparently rather disparate analytical tools at our disposal. In the chapters of this volume, some of these approaches are introduced and explained in detail.

Since discourse is first of all a form of language use, it goes without saying that linguistic methods of analysis have played a predominant role in the study of text and talk. Many types of structural, generative, or functional grammars have been developed to describe the properties of verbal utterances. Thus, phonology, morphology, and syntax have emerged as increasingly explicit subcomponents of such grammars in order to characterize sound structures, word formation, and the formal structures of sentences. Similarly, semantics was developed to provide an account of the meaning of such expressions, for example, by means of rules of interpretation. Pragmatics soon followed in order to describe the role of utterances in the context, namely, as speech acts. Much of this earlier work in various grammars was restricted to single, isolated sentences. It was not until the late 1960s that pleas were made to extend this framework to the real forms of language use, that is, discourse.

Attempts were made to apply the theoretical machinery of grammar to the description of discourse structures beyond the sentence. In this volume it will be shown that this grammatical approach not only yielded **the** necessary explicitness and sophistication but also imposed a number of serious limitations.

Yet, linguistics is not equivalent with grammar,' although the practice of many linguists would often suggest such an identification. Verbal utterances, that is sentences and discourses, also may have style, for instance. However, the phenomenon of style was studied more often in poetics, sociolinguistics, or ethnography. Whereas grammars would often be constrained to the possible, grammatical forms of given language system, style had to do with the context-dependent variations of language use. Thus sociolinguistics paid attention to the choice of a specific style as a function of social situation, class or ethnic membership, or of social factors such as gender, age, status, or power. And literary scholarship was more interested in the characteristic, personal style of some unique work of art, or of an author or a period, or in the esthetic functions of specific stylistic choices. Common to these approaches, however, was the account of variable grammatical expression, such as specific sound realizations, intonation, lexical items, or syntactic structure, given the same underlying meaning or reference, as a function of different personal or social properties of the context of communication. In this sense, style is, so to speak, a major "indexical" property of discourse: It indicates at the surface the adequacy of the discourse within its social situation.

Classical rhetoric, however, had already suggested more than two thousand years ago that discourse involves more than just grammar, that is, rules for correct speaking of a language. Within a communicative framework, discourses also have specific functions, and rhetoric spelled out in great detail the conditions on the effectiveness of discourse within persuasive communicative functions. Adequate style is only one necessary dimension of such conditions of effectiveness. Additionally, we may find optional operations (*figurae*) at each level of grammatical description: figures of sounds, words, syntactic structure or meaning. Such figures would consist, for example, of specific transformations of such structures, for instance in the form of additions, repetitions, deletions, permutations, or substitutions. In other words, besides the grammar, and related to a stylistic account, we here find another structural approach to the description of discourse. Specific, however, is the functional dimension, namely effectiveness in bringing about acceptance or attitude change by the recipient in some social setting. That is, in addition to the structural aspects, cognitive and social psychological dimensions of discourse are involved. Discourse in that perspective is not just a verbal object but essentially

a form of social interaction. The full consequences of this fact have been drawn only in research since the mid 1970s, as we will see shortly.

Even in the framework of the structural characterization of language use, therefore, another dimension is lacking. Utterances are not just static verbal objects but ongoing dynamic accomplishments, that is, forms of action. In spoken discourse, we find not only discursive expressions of grammatical forms but also a complex array of nonverbal or paraverbal activities, such as intonation, gestures, facial expression, body position, and so on. Much of the interpretation and hence the functions of discourse depends on the interpretation of these activities and their relations with the verbal dimension of discourse. Although the more specific discourse implications of research on nonverbal communication are being drawn only recently, it is obvious that we here find another crucial approach to the description of discourse as a form of action.

Whereas most of the approaches mentioned above yield descriptions both for sentences and for discourse structures, we finally find another class of descriptive methods that deal more specifically with the overall organization of discourse and discursive interaction. Thus, stories not only consist of grammatical forms, meanings, style, or rhetorical operations; they also exhibit more specific schematic organizational patterns, that is, some kind of superstructures. These narrative structures can be characterized in terms of their own conventional categories and formation tales, so that even notions such as 'narrative grammars' have been used in order to explicitly account for such story structures. Similar remarks can be made for the overall organization of other discourse forms, such as argumentations or news discourse. Classical syllogisms, thus, are not only a form of (logical or natural) reasoning but are at the same time patterns for reasoning in discourse, that is, of argumentation. Future work must systematically explore what other schematic patterns of this sort can be made explicit for different discourse types.

In fact, such schematic patterns can be found also in other domains of discourse analysis, for example, in metrics and the study of prosody. Familiar examples from literary scholarship are the distribution and organization of sounds and syntactic or morphological structures, in poetry and drama.

While many of these specific patterns and units apply to written or fixed discourse types, it goes without saying that other forms of organization can be found in discourse when it is taken as a form of interaction. Speaker turns and strategic moves on the microlevel and, on the macrolevel, overall organization of conversations and other dialogues such as openings and closings have been proposed as new elements of discourse analysis.

At this point we have come far from the structural characterizations

of verbal utterances as they were proposed by structural grammars. Speech acts, style, figures of speech, nonverbal interaction, metrical patterns, narrative schemata or dialogical units of interaction have been added, some two millenia ago, others two decades ago. Obviously, such different properties of discourse may each require its own subtheory, but ultimately such descriptions should of course be integrated. For instance, the precise relations between pragmatics and grammar remain subject to much confusion. Similarly, it remains to be made explicit in detail how narrative schemata relate to the linguistic properties, such as the global meanings, of discourse. Other notions, such as strategic moves in interaction, as yet hardly have an explicit theoretical foundation. The same holds for the interrelations with nonverbal interaction or other semiotic codes, such as pictures, film, or symbols, for example, in mixed discourse such as comic strips, movies, dramatic performances, or TV programs. In this respect, even the rather sophisticated developments of structural discourse analysis have still little to offer. We find here some of the many suggestions for work in the future.

#### FROM STRUCTURAL DESCRIPTIONS TO FUNCTIONAL ANALYSIS

Structural descriptions characterize discourse at several levels or dimensions of analysis and in terms of many different units, categories, schematic patterns, or relations. They do so both for monological texts, as well as for dialogical forms of interaction, that is, talk. The definition of discourse as a form of social interaction, however, still leaves us with an isolated unit of analysis. That is, structural analysis disregards the functional relations with the contexts of which discourse is a part. This holds for grammar, metrics, narrative theory, and conversational analysis alike. And even stylistics and rhetoric, of which the functional nature is constitutive (if we want to define the context-dependent notions of 'variable adequacy' or 'persuasive effectiveness'), have often paid only lip service to their contextual foundations. In other words, a complete characterization of discourse as a complex event requires further analysis in terms of the relations with the cognitive, social, and cultural contexts.

To illustrate this inherent interdependence of text and context, we may consider the role of discourse in a cognitive model. Scholars in the fields of psychology and artificial intelligence are not only interested in the various structures of discourse as abstractly characterized by the many subdisciplines of discourse analysis enumerated above. They also want to provide an account of the actual processes involved in the use of

discourse, that is in the production and comprehension of discourse by speakers and hearers (writers and readers). They are interested in the cognitive representations of discourse in memory as well as in other information, such as knowledge and beliefs, necessary during discourse understanding. If we want an adequate picture of what people are actually doing when engaged in discourse, this more empirical analysis is of course crucial. Grammatical structures, style or narrative structures, and the organizational patterns of dialogue are in this respect merely theoretical abstractions of the kinds of structures, units, representations, schemata, and rules or strategies used in verbal interaction. This abstraction may be theoretically and methodologically useful for a while and will certainly advance our thinking about such context-free structures. Yet the roles, functions, effects, and conditions of discourse in processes of understanding, information processing, and communication in the sociocultural context depend on these cognitive representations of discourse and not on the abstract reconstruction of discourse structures in grammars or theories of style, rhetoric, or narrative schemata. Speakers in conversation plan their next turn in talk on the basis of their understanding of what has been said by the previous speaker and on the basis of their cognitive representation of the whole social situation. A full account of what takes place in conversation and other discourse forms, therefore, should not take such cognitive processes for granted or reconstruct them in abstract or intuitive terms; it requires an integration with a cognitive model of conversational understanding, monitoring, planning, and strategic interaction.

The conclusion from this argument is that an interdisciplinary approach to discourse cannot be limited to structural analysis of its various levels or dimensions but also needs to pay attention to cognitive processes and to memory representations of discourse. Storage, retrieval, cognitive strategies, memory limitations, and effective organization procedures for information processing become relevant in such an account. For instance, the possible effects or functions of discourse in the social context crucially depend on what information about the text, dialogue, or communicative situation can be retrieved from memory (when, by whom, and under what conditions). Any model of learning, persuasion, attitude change, or the acquisition of social knowledge and beliefs through verbal communication presupposes such an account.

The approaches taken to describe what goes on cognitively have been strikingly and often uncomfortably close to the more abstract structural models sketched above: grammar, logic, and narrative grammars. It has been realized, however, that cognitive models need their own independent units, categories, and levels of analysis. These may not be organized

along the precise delimitation of the levels and dimensions of the structural theories. They may involve complex cognitive strategies of processing information, online procedures, handling simultaneous levels and parallel information and so on. Other notions such as goals, plans, scripts, or cognitive schemata are involved to account for the understanding and representation of stories. And finally, the complex interactions between textual representations of this type with other forms of personal and social knowledge, or beliefs and attitudes, in memory need to be spelled out. This complex framework, then, counts as an empirical description of the interpretation of a discourse by language users. It is obvious that formal semantics can only be a distant abstraction of this kind of meaning assignment. We see that the notion 'meaning of a discourse' requires analysis within several frameworks, and one of the tasks of an integrated discourse analysis is to link these frameworks into one theory.

Similar remarks may be made for the relations with the social context. Sociolinguistics—or the sociology of language—has performed part of the task of relating discourse to the social context. Yet an integrated analysis of discourse in social situations is theoretically still primitive. Even the social-psychological and sociological analysis of situations and interactions has a tradition that is hardly older than that of discourse analysis itself. Speech act theory, which should function as one of the bridges between utterances as verbal objects and utterances as social acts—as been largely a philosophical and linguistic enterprise. Appropriateness conditions for speech acts are, much like the rules of grammar, fairly abstract representations of the actual cognitive and social preconditions for the successful performance of discourse as social action. A full social analysis of threats, promises, congratulations, or accusations of course involves more than required propositional content or the knowledge and wants of speakers with respect to the actions of hearers. Threats, for instance, would require a complex analysis of the social situation in terms of dominance relations, power, control, roles, norms, and their dynamic interpretation and enactment. Besides the ideal conditions for threatening, we need to know how people actually go about threatening each other, both in terms of detailed conversational strategies and in terms of the other properties of interaction in the situation. Besides the illocutionary meanings of threats, such an account would of course also involve the perlocutionary effects of threatening acts, such as acceptance or rejection, the execution of action, and the changes in the social situation. We have suggested above that such an account cannot be independent of a cognitive approach. Interpretative sociology has emphasized the importance of the commonsense strategies people use when dealing with social reality. Communication and interaction are real, therefore, only

according to these (cognitive) categories and maneuvers of making sense, and these reconstructive interpretations are the input for further interaction. Abstractions and intuitions about such processes may of course carry us far in the account of commonsense procedures of social members, but it has become obvious that such an approach can be explicit and empirically warranted only when we devise a cognitive interface among discourse, interaction, and the social situation.

Next, the features of the social situation that are relevant for language users as social members should be systematically worked out. This would require, for instance, a typology of communicative social situations. Some of the elements of such a typology have been studied in more detail, such as informal conversations, doctor's visits, classroom dialogues, job interviews, and police practices. Many others, for example, parliamentary debates, decision-making procedures in corporations and the production and understanding of TV programs, have received much less attention from a (social) discourse analytical point of view. Also, the relevant categories in such situations need further attention. Gender, age, class, and ethnic group are conventional sociological abstractions of which the relevance for grammatical variation, style, narrative structures, and rhetoric have been demonstrated in rather global terms. Exactly how such features of discourse depend on them remains unclear.

One example in point is the description of interethnic communication. The characterization of discourse and nonverbal activities and their social functions and implications in interaction between members of different ethnic groups has often been made from the point of view of the (white) majority members. The consequences for a sociology of discourse of such a perspective are far-reaching. First, the explication of the commonsense categories used by social members in the interpretation and execution of ongoing encounters with ethnic minority members may well be in conflict with an explication in terms of the interpretations of minority members. What is a normal reproach for one group may be a racist remark for the other group. Second, the relevant categories, principles, and rules of discourse and interaction, and hence also our analysis, may have a cultural bias.

Such biases in description are of course well known in the anthropological and ethnographic literature and also apply to the description of discourse in other societies and cultures. Especially for those discourse structures that are closely linked with social structure, such as style, rhetorical features, narrative categories, and the schematic organization of communicative events, ethnocentrism in the categories of description and the norms or principles of evaluation is a highly relevant danger. For our discussion it is therefore important to stress that the methods of

description in discourse analysis as they have been outlined in this Introduction are necessarily heavily influenced by a long historical and cultural tradition and are therefore ethnically context bound and certainly not universal.

## **OTHER APPROACHES**

In the previous sections we have surveyed a considerable number of descriptive approaches to discourse. We have tried to indicate how these various methods of analysis and their underlying theories can or should be connected. Yet, it is obvious that none of these orientations can claim to be the only method for discourse analysis. To stress this diversity and the need for integration, a brief selection of additional approaches in the humanities and social sciences follows.

The understanding and explanation of the Bible and other sacred texts led in the Middle Ages to what was called a "hermeneutic" approach. One feature of hermeneutics was that the analysis of texts should take place at several levels. Beyond the level of literal expressions and meanings, a nonliteral or metaphorical level was distinguished, for example, for the description of biblical parables. And even beyond such a level, some kind of transcendent meaning, a metaphysical meaning or function of the text, needed to be assessed. In the twentieth century, hermeneutics has been especially applied in the realm of literary, historical, and legal discourse and was extended to a more general theory of interpretation. Unlike the formal and more objective rules of interpretation of grammar or logic, this approach stressed the role of subjective interpretation procedures, involving, for example, empathy with interpreted objects and the relevance of personal experiences of the interpreter. One line of this approach later characterized the phenomenological underpinnings of current interpretative sociology.

A quite different line of research can be summarized under the label of "ideological analysis" of discourse. Inspired mainly by Marxist views about the relations between socioeconomic infrastructures and cultural superstructures, such an analysis primarily views discourse as an expression of class conflicts, false consciousness, exploitation, or power relations in society. That is, discourse features are interpreted as social indicators of interests of the speakers or writers. In this respect, ideological analysis shares with hermeneutics the subjective nature of discourse analysis, while on the other hand it stresses the objective nature of the social determination of discourse production itself. Ideological analysis will often have a critical dimension in the sense that it intends to reveal



underlying class conflicts, power relations, and ideologies through discourse analysis. It is therefore often applied in the analysis of public discourse such as political discourse, news, or the texts of governments or big organizations.

Most of the analytical methods introduced above have a qualitative nature. They characterize structures or representations, or specify rules or strategies of interpretation. We find, however, a quantitative emphasis in the various methods known under the label of "content analysis." In fact, these methods presuppose the categories of qualitative analysis, such as words, sentences, and stylistic features. Yet, they may also involve more ad hoc units of analysis, such as news headlines or column centimeters in the content analysis of news in the press. Especially for large amounts of discourse data, and in order to establish frequencies and to apply statistical methods, such forms of discourse analysis have become an important practical tool in the social sciences. It may be expected that explication of qualitative analyses, and especially the automatic, computerized description of texts, may lead to an integration of quantitative and qualitative approaches.

Similar remarks may be made for the vast array of experimental methods in psychology. We have seen above that cognitive models are being designed in psychology and artificial intelligence that involve qualitative methods for the analysis of representations of discourse or beliefs in memory. However, not only representations, but especially also processes such as strategies, are crucial in discourse understanding. The usual units, categories, and rules of grammars, stylistics, rhetoric, and narrative theories are not developed for such dynamic features of discourse. Other approaches such as production systems, transition networks, procedural semantics, and processes of spreading activation and their simulation in computer programs are examples of different approaches to the cognitive reality of discourse processing. Special experimental techniques such as the measurement of reaction times, interpretation times, recall or recognition ratios, and priming methods may be relevant in the assessment of such underlying discourse processes. Protocol analysis, similarly, is an important method for reconstructing cognitive processes of understanding and problem solving through the self-reports (think-aloud reports) of subjects. One important result of these experimental methods and techniques is that it may be shown that many structural properties of discourse such as syntactic sentence organization, pronominalization, topic-comment articulation, and story structures may have a cognitive basis. In this way, structural and cognitive models of discourse may be integrated.

Although the methods briefly mentioned above are very different in style, theoretical foundation, and aims, they share some common properties.

First, they very often show a primary interest for the explicit (and sometimes implicit or absent) content of discourse. In that respect they are sometimes intuitive forms of semantic analysis. Second, this analysis is carried out not for its own sake but in order to get at underlying cognitive or social facts. Hermeneutics, thus, focuses on the expression of subjective, personal world views or values. The emphasis in ideological analysis is the underlying ideology of speakers or writers and hence class-dependent interests and their socioeconomical basis. Content analysis, as its name suggests, analyzes content mainly as an expression of social or institutional features of production and communication in general. And the various methods of psychology and artificial intelligence are geared toward the assessment of underlying (or determining) cognitive representations or processes. In other words, many of the methods of discourse analysis in the social sciences have an instrumental nature. Now, it is realized that social discourse also deserves attention in its own right, that is, not only as an expression or indication of something else but as an autonomous form of social action and interaction.

Finally, it should be added that the goal in all methods and directions of research discussed above has been more explicit, more systematic, and more formal analyses. This obvious scientific requirement has led to a widespread use of logical, mathematic or other formal systems. Predicate logic, set theory, modal logics, graph theory or network analysis, and various theories of probability and decision making have been called on for help, for instance in the various branches of a theory of language and discourse interpretation (semantics). Besides their usual role in formalization, such approaches might yield the level of abstraction necessary for the integration of the rather disparate qualitative analyses in the many branches of discourse analysis. As yet, however, such a formal integration is still premature. It has been indicated repeatedly above that a large amount of elementary substantial descriptions are still necessary at all levels and dimensions of text and context. Nontrivial formalization presupposes systematic theory formation and the precise definition of units, categories, rules, strategies, and other processes in these various domains.

## CONCLUSIONS

It may have become clear from the previous sections that discourse analysis is not a simple enterprise. In its full richness it involves all the levels and methods of analysis of language, cognition, interaction, society, and culture. This is of course not surprising, since discourse itself is a manifestation of all these dimensions of society. This means that integral

discourse analysis is necessarily an interdisciplinary task and also that its complexity forces us to make specific choices among the many available methods, depending on the goals and functions of our analysis.

Another conclusion we have reached is that the classical theories and descriptive methods of linguistics and grammar yield only a partial account of discourse structures. Other properties of discourse such as style, rhetoric, schematic organization, overall patterns, and interactive aspects need to be described in their own right. Also, the various structural theories need to be integrated, so as to specify the interrelations between the various levels or dimensions.

Next, it has been stressed that discourse cannot fully be characterized in terms of an isolated, abstract verbal object but also requires analysis in terms of its relations with various contexts. Cognitive processes of production, understanding, and representation are crucial in this respect and are essential for an account of the interpretations and uses of discourse by participants in social situations. Similarly, the details of the links between discourse structures and the structures and processes of social interaction and situations must be made explicit. It hardly needs to be emphasized that such an account should be aware of ethnic or cultural differences and hence realize its own possible biases.

Finally, there are more specific methods of discourse analysis, aiming at the revelation of underlying personal or social patterns as they are expressed or indicated by text and talk, as in the ideological analysis of discourse, the methods of psychology, or the simulation programs of artificial intelligence.

Without pretending to be complete, we have stressed this large variety of descriptive, analytic, and explanatory approaches, often across several disciplines, in order to place the chapters in this volume in a wider framework. It has been stressed in the Preface to this volume that all descriptive approaches cannot possibly be accommodated in a single book. We therefore have selected a number of well-known, explicit theoretical approaches that have become familiar in linguistics and psychology. The methods of the analysis of talk and interaction and ideological approaches to discourse, are exemplified in the next two volumes of this *Handbook*, respectively. This Introduction has gone beyond the presentation of the various structural methods as they are treated in more detail in the following chapters in order to show the interdependence with other functional and social accounts of discourse. It will be one major task of discourse analysis in the future to integrate these different descriptions and partial theories.