

Introduction: The Role of Discourse Analysis in Society

Teun A. van Dijk

THE USES OF DISCOURSE ANALYSIS IN SOCIETY

In the three previous volumes of this *Handbook* the many facets of the emerging discipline of discourse analysis have been highlighted. Against the background of developments in several disciplines in the humanities and the social sciences, it was shown how discourse in general, and specific discourse genres in particular, can be analyzed at several levels of description. One of the prevailing features of this new discipline of discourse analysis appears to be the explicit account of the fact that discourse structures, at several levels, may have multiple links with the context of communication and interaction. Discourse analysis, thus, is essentially a contribution to the study of language "in use." Besides—or even instead—of an explication of the abstract structures of texts or conversations, we witness a concerted interest for the cognitive and especially the social processes, strategies, and contextualization of discourse taken as a mode of interaction in highly complex sociocultural situations.

One important dimension is still lacking in this account, however. Having obtained some insights into the social functions of discourse, we also might ask what the social role of discourse analysis as a discipline is. That is, what are the "external" goals of this new approach to language and communication? Or, to put it even more bluntly: What are the uses of discourse analysis? Especially for linguists, such questions may appear irrelevant. If the "internal" or academic goals, such as those of observational, descriptive, or explanatory adequacy, or maybe empirical validity,

in the account of language and language use are reached, who cares about the possible usefulness of our insights? Possible applications, for example, for practical purposes in several social domains, are seen as by-products of linguistic inquiry, and applied research does not seem to have the same status as theoretical and descriptive work. And the same holds for possible external constraints upon the selection of our research objects, problems, or goals: What discourses, by what participants, and in what contexts do we study? Pressing social issues or problems thus, have little bearing upon the research goals of the linguist. And applications have been limited mostly to the field of first- and second-language learning, or are left to the discretion of psycho- and sociolinguists. Traditionally, social scientists paid more attention to this problematic issue. Their insights into the nature of social interaction and institutions may also be evaluated as to their possible contribution to the understanding, or even the solution, of important social problems. To be sure, many social scientists may ignore such external expectations or demands, either because they just are not interested or because they deem their knowledge to be too fragile to be relevantly applied. Any effective use that might be made of their work is considered premature or superficial, if not an abuse of theoretical subtleties and complexities. Obviously, however, whatever good reasons both linguists and social scientists might have for avoiding this kind of involvement, there is also much ideology at stake; that is, justification patterns for professional interests. Although it would be interesting to analyze such an ideology in detail and to try to explain the reasons for the lack of interesting contributions of linguistics and discourse analysis to the insight of relevant social problems, I here mainly sketch some of the conditions and the modes of the role of discourse analysis as social analysis. The various papers in this volume of the *Handbook* then spell out, more concretely, how relevant social issues can be addressed in terms of our understanding of the role of discourse in society and culture.

The attention paid to this issue in a full separate volume of the *Handbook* is not merely based on the personal, social, or political responsibility of a number of linguists or social scientists (myself included). It has been stressed in the general introduction to this *Handbook* that it should serve both academic and practical goals: It should be shown what we can do with discourse analysis. Obviously, I here mean more than to provide adequate descriptions of text and context. That is, we expect more from discourse analysis as the study of real language use, by real speakers in real situations, than we expect from the study of abstract syntax or formal semantics. Together with psycho- and sociolinguistics, discourse analysis has definitely brought linguistics to the realm of the social sciences.

So we now may expect some rather concrete requests for help by other social scientists in the account of social problems. As long as we dealt with abstract grammars, sophisticated formalisms, or idealistic speech act theories, our preoccupations were possibly respected or admired, but further ignored, in the majority of the social sciences. Now that we claim to have better insights into the nature of actual language use, and into the intricate relations between discourses and social situations and institutions, we may have to deliver more than just another sophisticated theory or fancy description.

THE PROBLEM OF APPLICATION AND SOCIAL RELEVANCE

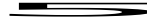
When we address the problem of possible applications and social relevance for the study of discourse, we enter a confused discussion. This discussion is far from new and has flared up periodically since the work of the scholars of the Frankfurter school, for example, and since the reformulation of their ideas during the student movements at the end of the 1960s. I cannot even try to review the main tenets of this debate here. What is at stake is the sociopolitical function of the scientific and academic work we do, and hence interests and ideologies. One party in this debate claims that the choice of our research goals, our methods of inquiry, our theories, and the objects of analysis cannot be independent of our own sociopolitical positions—and interests—and of the wider social context of research. That claim can be backed with many examples from the development of the social sciences. Maybe the more prominent contemporary example is the widespread and rapid development of feminist research in a number of disciplines. Others include the emerging ethnic studies and research programs in several countries. Male chauvinism, ethnocentrism, racism, middle-class interests, Western dominance, and so on have become familiar types of criticism and reasons for action, both in our society at large and within our academic domains. Another party in this debate might go along a little bit with these arguments or criticisms, but it will firmly refuse to mix science with "politics": Maybe we should indeed adapt the goals of our research, extend the domain or object of analysis, and revise the overall perspective a bit, but on the whole, academic scholarship should remain autonomous, and not be put under the constraints of external social or political developments, decisions, or policies. Of course, intermediary positions are possible too.

Although we feel an affiliation with the first position mentioned above, this does not mean that we have a clear picture in mind, let alone an

explicit methodology, about what it means exactly to do socially relevant research, especially in the field of discourse analysis. On the one hand, we may have directly effective applications in language-learning programs or therapies, which would fall under the scope of what could be called "practical relevance." On the other hand, it will often be claimed (though seldom proved by a thorough analysis of the history of science) that even the most abstract and apparently irrelevant theoretical endeavors may later turn out to be of utmost practical relevance. The usual examples in this case generally come from physics, chemistry, or biology and their possible applications in new technologies or as medical treatments. Against this background, therefore, we must indicate some of the difficulties and possibilities for the adequate application of discourse analysis in socially relevant research.

THE RELEVANCE OF DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

An obvious first claim that could be made about the possible social relevance of discourse analysis is that the very choice or extension of the object or field of linguistic research—actual language use in its social context—already satisfies a condition of social relevance—it provides insight into the forms and mechanisms of human communication and verbal interaction. Clearly, such insight is necessary for relevant applications, but this is hardly a sufficient condition. It only places the study of language where it belongs in the first place: namely, among the social sciences. It still has few implications for the methods of inquiry, for the structure of theories, for the choice of specific discourse types or discourse properties, or for the analysis of specific social contexts. The development of discourse analysis in the 1970s has also shown, on the one hand, that structural analysis of texts or conversations may be as abstract and as far removed from actual language use as the earlier sentence grammars, and, on the other hand, that studies of language in the social context may pay attention to rather trivial or hardly critical examples of language use and communication. And similar remarks may be made for the development of models of discourse processing in psychology and artificial intelligence. We now know much more about the rules, the moves, and the strategies of everyday talk. We know about coherence and cohesion, and we have some insight into the structures and the conversational occasioning of stories or into the cognitive processes involved in the understanding and representation of stories. However we also begin to grasp some of the constraints of the various features of the social context, such as gender, status, power, ethnicity, roles, or institutional settings,



upon the style, the thematic structure, or the cognitive interpretation of text and talk. Clearly, these latter contributions to the study of discourse in its social context provide a next step on the difficult route toward relevant applications, and some of the studies in this volume explicitly try to give answers to these important issues in the sociology of discourse.

Yet, although we draw closer to the issue at hand, one aspect is still lacking. It is certainly important to know how women's and men's speech may differ, how young urban American black men may be experts in the art of verbal dueling, how judges and lawyers address the defendant in court, or what style of talk a policeman adopts when giving us a speeding ticket. The same holds for the interesting observations in studies of newspaper discourse, parliamentary debates, laws, advertising, or TV programs. We have selected important and even relevant objects, phenomena, or locations of inquiry. But this does not yet guarantee that we pose relevant questions. We simply do not yet know whether a study of pauses, hesitation phenomena, local coherence, paraverbal gestures, or style in a job interview, a court trial, or a TV program will provide socially interesting answers about what is really going on in such communicative events.

We only tell a tiny fragment of the story if we do not specify how such discourse details serve a function in the creation, the maintenance, or the change of such contextual constraints as the dominance, the power, the status, or the ethnocentrism of one of the participants. Analysis of the discourses in the classroom, the office, or the social welfare agency can hardly be called complete if we do not thereby show how a teacher, a boss, or a social worker enacts social roles, shows power, and exerts control. An explication of the complex structures of everyday talk becomes even more interesting if we can relate them to the social parameters mentioned above and if we can show what kind of personal problems people may have in the adequate participation in such talk, what kind of individual pathologies may surface by such discourse, or what conflicts can be at stake in such interactions. If we study (as in a project being carried out at the University of Amsterdam) what people tell us or each other about the ethnic minorities in their town or neighborhood, we may, just for fun, study sociocultural variations in style, storytelling, and argumentation, or the strategies of talk and interviews. Yet, such analyses show that at these levels of description people will, sometimes indirectly, express contradictory ethnic attitudes. And the analyses become really interesting when they expone the cognitive and social strategies used by people both to express their negative experiences and opinions and to present themselves as kind, tolerant, nonracist citizens. Arriving at such insights, we learn more about the formation, the change, and the spread

of ethnic prejudice through everyday interaction, and thus about some of the underlying mechanisms of social attitudes and discrimination practices.

Several of the chapters in this volume not only take socially interesting objects for analysis but also try to answer some of the questions mentioned above about the social problems, conflicts, or predicaments related to such discourse and context types. It hardly needs to be stated in these cases that, in order to try to answer such specifically selected questions, we need the theoretical instruments and the more general analytic data and descriptions that constitute the wider framework. If we want to know how judges in court may display bias, prejudice, or power in interrogations or the justification of a verdict, we must of course first know about the general discursive structures of court trials, about the procedures of questioning or the structures of verdicts. And the same holds for the other examples we have mentioned. Yet these obvious preconditions for the solution of specific puzzles should be handled with care in our research strategies. More often than not they are used as avoidance arguments, as part of a strategy employed to mask lack of interest or to justify one's own hobbies. Clearly, we need not wait until the full general picture has been filled in, or the preliminary theories completely worked out. We started to study discourse without a complete theory of the sentence. In fact, we also started to do discourse analysis because we hoped to say more about sentence structures (a hope that turned out to be realistic). Similarly, if we try to answer specific relevant questions, we may well obtain insight into the more interesting and critical dimensions of what discourse and social interaction are all about. We are here back to the arguments of the more critical developments in the social sciences, such as feminist research, that would claim that the choice of relevant and sociopolitically motivated goals and objects of research will also affect, and maybe ameliorate, our very methods of inquiry and hence our theories and analytical instruments.

CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

There is another possible extension to relevant discourse analysis: the formulation of criticism and alternatives. Although we here leave the confines of academic control and enter clearly sociopolitical realms, this does not mean that we are powerless. There are many domains about which discourse analysis is able to provide relevant insights: the use of sexist discourse, racist reporting in the news media, the enactment of power in and by the discourses of authorities, the inequities confirmed

by the prevalence of white middle-class discourse styles in multi-ethnic schools, and so on. But even the choice of such specific research domains and problems, and even the formulation of relevant questions, does not yet provide solutions to problems or strategies to fight inequality. These will among other things depend on who will benefit from our insights, and what perspective is given to our results. Without a thoroughly founded criticism of those authorities or institutions who are responsible for the inequalities, we are no more than "free-floating intellectuals," paper tigers. It follows that a next step in the research program will be to make decisions about priority, about who to "sell" our work to, about the adaptation of our specific research goals and methods to those who are most in need of them. The groups of people and the areas of social problems concerned hardly need to be spelled out here. There are few but yet crucial studies, within or close to the purview of discourse analysis, that have shown that such critical discourse analysis is necessary, useful, and realistic. Work on the portrayal of industrial disputes in TV news, on the misrepresentation of political demonstrations as "violent riots," or on the bias in favor of the police or the authorities in the media coverage of "race riots" has shown that detailed discourse analysis can be brought to bear in the wider context of the challenge of authority and power and as a basis of political action. That such work is not necessarily linked to a socialist or Marxist tradition, or to predominantly European ways of doing research, may be illustrated by many other examples: as in the United States, where participation in such traditions is limited, but where the democratic and liberal ideals of a social context in which our universities not only have concrete professional tasks but also wider ranging responsibilities is taken seriously. Academic freedom also means the freedom to criticize. Discourse analysis provides us with rather powerful, while subtle and precise, insights to pinpoint the everyday manifestations and displays of social problems in communication and interaction. It is here that we witness the realization of the macrosociological patterns that characterize our societies. Certainly, discourse features may only be symptoms or fragmentary enactments of larger problems: inequality, class differences, sexism, racism, power, and dominance of course involve more than text and talk. Yet discourse plays a crucial role in their ideological formulation, in their communicative reproduction, in the social and political decision procedures, and in the institutional management and representation of such issues (e.g., in laws, meetings, media coverage, informal daily talk about them, their reformulation in documents). As soon as we know more about the discursive representation and management of such problems and conflicts, we have the design for the key that can disrupt, disclose, and challenge the mechanisms involved. Thus a subtle

analysis of the ways indirect forms of ethnocentrism and racism still exhibit themselves in our newspapers may lead journalists to at least change their selection of topics, to pay attention to the representation of actors in news events, to have due regard to subtleties of style, and even to adopt a special code for reporting about ethnic minorities and ethnic relations. This is one example among many. Although we may in this way change only some surface manifestation of a deeper or more complex problem, we at least have done more than just describe the words in the world.

It hardly needs to be reminded here that, besides these limitations to what we can do, there are other caveats to heed. Examples of theoretically ill-understood and methodologically wrong applications can be mentioned by any linguist and social scientist. Language programs conceived within sociolinguistic endeavors to eliminate linguistic "deficiencies" are well known for their weak sociolinguistic theory and for their wrong social perspective on the problems involved. Without a sound discourse analysis, which takes all the relevant discursive and contextual parameters into account, and without an adequate and critical social analysis of the power structures and group or ethnic differences and conflicts involved, we will of course yield the wrong assessment and hence misguided advice. Similar examples may be given for other domains of educational settings, for the news media, for legal discourse and interaction, or for the documents of public information. Yet, despite such warnings, we may also have some confidence, inspired by the rapid advances in the domain of discourse analysis. The chapters in this volume were written to show that, indeed, such advances, as they have been documented in the previous volumes, can be intelligently and critically put to actual use.