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Discourse Analysis.

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Discourse Analysis.

1. Historical Background.

The term first came into general use following the publication of a series of papers by Zellig Harris beginning in the 1950s and reporting on work from which he developed transformational grammar in the late 1930's. As a matter of fact, formal equivalence relations among the sentences of a coherent discourse are made explicit by using sentence transformations to put the text in a canonical form. Words and sentences with equivalent information then appear in the same column of an array. This work progressed over the next four decades into a science of sublanguage analysis, culminating in a demonstration of the informational structures in texts of a sublanguage; and subsequently, a fully articulated theory of linguistic informational content.

In the late 1960's and 1970's, and without reference to this prior work, a variety of other approaches to a new cross-discipline of discourse analysis began to develop in most of the humanities and social sciences concurrently with, and related to, other disciplines, such as semiotics, psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, and pragmatics. Many of these approaches, especially those influenced by the social sciences, favor a more dynamic study of oral-talk-in-interaction. Such dynamic and enthusiastic initiatives in connection with speech investigation may be generally represented by the sociologist Harold Garfinkel who introduced the notion of "conversational analysis" within the context of what he calls Ethnomethodology. Moreover, Michel Foucault, in Europe, became one of the key theorists of the subject, especially of discourse, and wrote 'The Archaeology of Knowledge' on the subject.

2. General Definitions.

It is generally established that discourse analysis (or discourse studies) is a global term for a number of approaches to analyzing written, spoken, signed language use or any significant semiotic event. The objects of discourse analysis (discourse, writing, conversation, communicative event etc...) are variously defined in terms of coherent sequences of sentences, propositions, speech acts or turns-at-talk. Contrary to much of traditional linguistics, discourse analysts not only study language use 'beyond the sentence boundary', but also prefer to analyze 'naturally occurring' language use, and not invented examples. This is known as corpus linguistics which is usually the focus of what is called Text Linguistics. However, the essential difference between

discourse analysis and text linguistics is that it aims at revealing socio-psychological characteristics of a person/persons rather than text structure.

One would agree that a clear and precise definition of discourse analysis is not an easy task to undertake. In fact, discourse studies are certainly multidisciplinary and; consequently, they are influenced by various factors which are closely connected to human spoken interaction. However, it is possible to put forward some major definitions that effectively contribute in the presentation and clarification of discourse analyses.

-a- Discourse Analysis as an Interdisciplinary Field.

As far as this principle is concerned, a general definition is suggested by S. Wothan (2007) who stipulates that: 'Discourse analysis is a broad and complex interdisciplinary field. It includes somewhat diverse theoretical and methodological approaches from linguistics, anthropology, and sociology.' All approaches share a commitment to studying language in context. But 'context is notoriously indeterminate, and different approaches to discourse analysis emphasize different aspects of context as potentially relevant to understanding language use.'

In addition, the same notion is equally put forward by H. Trapees-Lomax (2004) in his analysis of discourse studies: 'Discourse analysis is part of applied linguistics but does not belong; exclusively to it, it is a multi-disciplinary field, and hugely diverse in the range of its interests.'

-b- Discourse Analysis as the Study of Language Viewed Linguistically.

A discourse analysis or discourse study is a general term used to describe a range of research approaches that focus on the use of language. It has been used to understand a wide range of texts including natural speech, professional documentation, and political rhetoric, interview on focus group material, internet communication, journals and broadcast media.

3. The Use of Discourse Analysis.

-a- The aim of discourse analysis is not only a provision of definite answers but also the elaboration of our mind and thoughts in order to realize our own deficiency and ignorance.

-b- Discourse analysis focuses on the existence of text and its hidden messages in order to put them within social and historical context.

-c- M.A.K. Halliday (1978) suggests that discourse analysis 'sees language not as an autonomous system but as part of the wider socio-cultural context, as social semiotic; the aim is to look into language from outside and specifically, to interpret linguistic processes from the standpoint of the social order.'

-d- Moreover, H. Trapees-Lomax (2004) focuses on another aspect of discourse analysis which deals with language as a means of education and as a significant goal of the educational process especially in learning both the first and second languages.

-e- However, J.R. Martin (2002) believes that discourse analysis is more significant when its major objective is to provide a comprehensive theory of text analysis and genre.

-f- The founder of modern discourse analysis Z. Harris suggests that the study of language patterns beyond the sentence is not only quantitatively different but also qualitatively with respect to sentence analysis. Therefore, if sentence meaning is intrinsically encoded, that is to say, a semantic property of the language itself, then so is discourse meaning. Likewise, pragmatic considerations such as the speaker's intention implies that interpretation is not just a matter of what the sentence means in relation to the code, but also what the addresser means in relation to the contexts.

4. Types of Discourse Analysis.

There are many types of discourse analysis of natural conversation and each approach puts emphasis on its own propositions, focus and method; however, they share one major principle which is the construction of meaning within communication.

-a- Conversation Analysis.

It is an approach to the study of natural conversation which focuses on the analysis of the ways in which language is used such as reply to a spoken invitation. The interest is in how people use specific words that are assigned certain functions (linguistic), the techniques are usually quantitative.

-b- Discursive Psychology.

This is a form of discourse analysis which emphasizes psychological themes by using concepts of discourse in psychological issues such as memory and attitudes.

-c- Foucauldian Discourse Analysis.

It is an approach which is constructed upon the notions developed by M. Foucault, namely the focus on the historical development perspectives of discourse. It consists of the analysis of significant discursive phenomena with respect to their development and changes over time (for instance domination relationships and how they are constructed through discourse).

-d- Critical Discourse Analysis.

It is an interdisciplinary approach to the study of discourse that views language as a social practice structure. This is a post modern discourse analysis which contributed in the application of critical thought to social-situations and the revealing of political

secrets within social contexts. It concentrates on the aspects of social and political powers and how they are embedded in written and spoken discourse.

A major type of Critical Discourse Analysis is what is generally called **Political Discourse Studies**. This sub-category of discourse studies focuses on discourse in political forums (such as debates, speeches and hearings) as the most significant phenomenon of interest. In fact, political discourse is the informal exchange of reasoned views as to which several alternative courses of action should be taken to solve a societal problem. This type of discourse is mainly characterized by persuasion, debates, candidacies and other socio-political issues.

5. Cultural Context and Discourse Analysis.

It is evident that the interface of language and culture is particularly significant in relation to discourse studies. This interrelation can be summarized in the following points:

- a- Socio-cultural factors simplify the interpretation of discourse.
- b- The successful act of communication usually depends on the acquaintance with the socio-cultural elements.
- c- The ignorance of the socio-cultural factors may lead to the misunderstanding of discourse or even to the misinterpretation of the message which may result with a serious breakdown of communication.
- d- The interpretation of the speaker's intentions and the significance of his message rely on the degree of understanding of the cultural background of this speaker.
- e- The cultural context determines the register and linguistic appropriateness.
- f- The linguistic behaviors (discourse) cannot be explained by merely looking at the text and context without any comprehension of what cultural norms and tendencies underlie them.
- g- The cultural context complements and even strengthens the findings from the discourse studies since it can provide rich resources for verification and validation.

Aspects of the Cultural Context.

It is universally recognized that speech communities are characterized by different and various social, political and religious traits. Obviously, these differences affect the interpersonal communication since each society possesses its own socio-cultural

system; consequently, any act of communication is deemed to be influenced by those important factors:

-a- Racial and Ethnic Identification.

Human beings define themselves through the communities in which they have been born and nurtured.

-b- Economic and Social Class.

We define our culture through the social stratum (strata) of class and economic level which in turn they greatly affect the way we communicate interpersonally.

-c- Gender and Communication.

Human beings develop their cultural identity in light of sexual characteristics and; therefore, this factor influences the acquisition of gender- related interpersonal roles and rules of interaction (affective orientation may be one aspect of this element).

-d- Tradition and History.

The definition of speech communities depends on their cultures, traditions and historical backgrounds.

-e- Law and Order.

It is equally possible to define the cultural components through the law system that a given society adapts. In fact, the legal orders should be respected and obeyed to by all members of the society.

-6- Perspectives and Scope of Discourse Analysis.

-A- Discourse Analysis and Cultural Context.

It is easily understandable that the interpretation of the term culture represents an essential issue in defining the relationships which naturally exist between the discourse and its cultural background. As a matter of fact, the concept has been defined in various ways in different disciplines. However, it is generally agreed that culture represents the pattern of meanings embodied in symbolic forms and actions by virtue of which individuals communicate and share their experiences, conceptions and beliefs (Henkel p 77). Accordingly, the cultural context refers to the culture, customs and background of epoch in language communities, hence, participants utilize a discourse or text which is directly derived from their culture.

Therefore, discourse analysis displays a close tied up with the cultural context and it can not avoid being influenced by the socio-cultural factors such as the social roles, status, social structures which determine the value system of society. In order to

describe brood-brush cultural differences between speech communities, discourse analysts propose a practical classification of the cultural context into two levels:

- High cultural context: it refers to societies or groups where people develop close connections over a long period of time. Many aspects of cultural behavior are made explicit because most members know what to do and what to think from years of interaction with each other; the family is probably a significant example of high context environment.
- Low cultural context: it characterizes societies where people tend to have many connections but of shorter duration and for some specific reasons. In these communities, cultural behavior and beliefs may need to be spelled out explicitly in order to enable the participants coming into the cultural environment to behave appropriately.

On the other hand, one should recognize that the concept of discourse is bound up with culture in multiple and complex ways. In fact, whenever a member of a speech community speaks or writes, he always and simultaneously displays three aspects of his cultural reality:

-a- The discourse expresses cultural reality: the words people utter usually refer to common experience, the act of speaking or writing expresses facts, ideas or events that are related to one's culture. Obviously, people refer to a stock of knowledge about the speech community which is shared by all members of the society. In short, spoken or written discourse not only reflects people's attitudes and beliefs as a social group but also individual traits.

-b- The discourse embodies cultural reality: the discourse does not only express our cultural reality but it is as well deeply impregnated with the characteristics of each culture. Therefore, whatever the medium we choose to communicate with each other such as speaking on the telephone or face-to-face, writing a letter or sending an e-mail message, or interpreting a graph or a chart; there are certain basic cultural indicators that are common to all members which greatly contribute in the interpretation of the discourse. These verbal and non-verbal aspects of discourse precisely the tone of voice, accent, conversational styles, gestures and facial expressions encompass our cultural reality.

-c- The discourse symbolizes cultural reality: any discourse (spoken or written) should be expressed through a particular language. It is also recognized that any human language is defined by its specific cultural features. Speakers identify themselves and their culture through their use of language which is viewed as the symbol of social identity. However, any kind of prohibition of its use is often perceived by its speakers as a rejection of their social group and their culture (Kramsch, 1993).

-B- Conversation Analysis.

Conversation is a significant mode of discourse which represents excellent examples of the social and interactive nature of communication. In foreign language learning, the mastery of conversational parameters is primordial in any successful act of communication. Necessarily, foreign language learners should be aware of the essential conventions, rules and cultural traits that determine conversation in the target language. Nonetheless, the process may be facilitated if the first and foreign languages share the same cultural background. In fact, the organization and development of conversation are nearly identical in all human languages and it is usually divided into four major sequences:

-a- Attention-getting: it is the first and crucial rule of conversation which children learn very early in life. The attention-getting conventions within each language- both verbal and non-verbal- need to be carefully assimilated by learners. Without knowledge of such conventions, foreign language learners encounter tremendous difficulties to participate in the conversation. The main reason is that they are unable to turn off their hearer to the topic they wish to discuss.

-b- Topic-nomination: once the speaker has secured the hearer's attention, the subsequent task is of topic-nomination. One can observe that rules for nominating topics in conversations which involve both verbal and non-verbal cues are highly contextually constrained.

-c- Topic-development: after the identification and agreement of the topic, participants in a conversation then embark on topic development using conventions of turn-taking to accomplish many functions of language. Topic clarification manifests itself in various forms of heuristic functions. In the case of conversation between foreign language learners and native speakers, topic clarification often involves seeking or giving repair of linguistic forms that contains errors.

-d- Topic-termination: it is an art that even native speakers of a language have difficulty in mastering at times. We experience situations in which a conversation has ensued for some time and neither participant seems to know how to conclude it with verbal or non-verbal termination. Consequently, it is important for foreign language teachers to be fully aware of the significance of the rules of conversation and to help learners to both perceive those rules and follow them in their own conversations.

-C- Corpus Linguistics.

It is a branch of discourse analysis that has experienced phenomenal growth and interest over the last decade or so, an approach to linguistic research that relies on computer analyses of language. The corpus is a collection of texts- written or transcribed speech or both- that is stored in electronic forms and analyzed with the help of computer software programs.

As far as the teaching of foreign languages is concerned, the benefits of corpus linguistics hold promise for enlightening not only our language teaching methodology, but also for understanding the nature of linguistics discourse in general. For instance, writing contexts (who is writing, to whom, and for what purpose) and specific conventions within sub-groups of genres (scientific laboratory report, a personal narrative essay) may encourage and prove the importance for learners to elaborate their own voice while they develop the kind of empathy toward the specific intended audience.

Conclusion.

In summation, a distinction is often made between 'local' structures of discourse such as relations among sentences, propositions and turns, and 'global' structures like overall topics and the schematic organization of discourses and conversations. Hence, an interesting illustration will certainly be the various types of discourse generally begin with some kind of 'global' summary in titles, headlines, leads, abstracts and so on. Moreover, the linguistic discourse analysis implies some specific theoretical perspectives and analytical approaches that involve various domains and disciplines; namely ethnography of communication, interactional sociolinguistics, pragmatics, stylistics, etc.... Although these approaches emphasize different aspects of language use, they all view language as social interaction and are equally concerned with the social contexts in which discourse is embedded.

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