Discourse Versus discourse

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Discourse analysis is the study of language in use (Fairclough, 1992; Gee, 1999). When we use language to communicate we must signal to our listeners *who* we are (in the sense of what socially meaningful identity or role we are speaking out of) and *what* we are doing (what action or activity we are attempting to carry out). People talk and act not just as individuals, but as members of various sorts of social and cultural groups associated with different identities. For example, if a policeman says "You should move your car" we need to know if he is speaking in his role as a policeman and ordering us to move the car, or speaking as a helpful fellow citizen giving us advice.

We determine who is speaking to us—in terms of a social identity or role—and what the speaker is trying to accomplish not just from the words uttered but also from the context in which they were uttered. Context is composed of not just what has been said, but all that is physically present and whatever shared knowledge, beliefs, and culture speakers and listeners assume can be taken for granted. Further, language and context are reflexively related to each other: what we say encourages listeners to interpret the context in certain ways, but what we take the context to be guides us in how we interpret the meaning of what has been said (Duranti, 1997).

We do not invent our language, we inherit it from others. We understand each other because we share conventions about how to use and interpret language. We can most certainly innovate within these conventions—create new words, give new meanings to old words, find new ways of saying things—but these innovations must be shared with others. The social groups in which we share conventions about how to use and interpret language are many and varied. These groups include cultures; ethnic groups; professions like doctors, lawyers, teachers, and carpenters; academic disciplines; interest-driven groups like bird-watchers and video-gamers; and organizations like street gangs, the military, and sports teams. There are yet many other sorts of social groups. Each of them has distinctive ways with words associated with distinctive identities and activities.

There is no one word for all these sorts of groups within which we humans act out distinctive identities and activities. People have tried various names for them: cultures (broadening the term), communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991), speech communities (Labov, 1972a, 1972b), discourse communities (Bizzell, 1992), activity systems (Engeström, Miettinen, & Punamäki, 1999), actor–actant networks (Latour, 2005), collectives (Latour, 2004), thought collectives (Fleck, 1979), and others, such as professions and institutions. Each label is meant to capture only some such groups, or only some aspects of such groups' practices.

Gee (1990; see also Gee, 1989, 1999) introduced the term "Discourse" with a capital "D" (so-called "big 'D' Discourses") for any such group and the ways in which such socially based group conventions allow people to enact specific identities and activities. He used this term because such groups continue through time—for the most part, they were here before we arrived on earth and will be here after we leave—and we can see them as communicating ("discoursing") with each other through time and history, using us as their temporary mouthpieces. Gee used the term "discourse" (with a little "d") for any stretch of language in use. The following discussion is based on Gee (1990, 1999, and their subsequent editions).

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Gee (1990, 1999) introduced the term "social language" for distinctive styles or varieties of language with which people enact specific socially recognizable identities and actions or activities. Social languages allow people to speak as certain types of African Americans, doctors, soldiers, gamers, mathematicians, gang members, bird-watchers, politicians, or any of a great many other groups. However, when we enact an identity in the world, we do not just use language all by itself to do this. We use language, but we also use distinctive ways of acting, interacting with others, believing, valuing, dressing, and using various sorts of objects and tools in various sorts of distinctive environments.

If you want to show you are a basketball player you cannot just "talk the talk," you have to "walk the walk" and do that with a basketball on a basketball court in front of other people. If you want to get recognized as a devout Catholic, you cannot just talk the "right" way about the "right" things, you also have to engage in certain actions (like going to Mass) with the "right" people (e.g., priests) in the "right" places (e.g., church) and you have to display the "right" sorts of beliefs (e.g., about the virgin birth of Christ from his mother Mary) and values (e.g., deference to the Pope). The same is true of trying to get recognized as a "Native American," a "good student," a "tough policeman," or a "competent doctor." You need to talk the talk and walk the walk.

A Discourse with a capital "D" is composed of distinctive ways of speaking and listening and often, too, distinctive ways of writing and reading. These distinctive ways of speaking and listening, and reading and writing, or both, are coupled with distinctive ways of acting, interacting, valuing, feeling, dressing, thinking, and believing. In turn, all of these are coupled with ways of coordinating oneself with ("getting in sync with") other people, and with various objects, tools, and technologies. All this is in the service of enacting specific socially recognizable identities. These identities might be things like being a Los Angeles Latino street-gang member, a Los Angeles policeman, a field biologist, a first-grade student in a specific classroom and school, a "SPED" student, a certain type of doctor, lawyer, teacher, African American, worker in a "quality control" workplace, man, woman, boyfriend, girlfriend, regular at the local bar, and so on through a virtually endless list.

Discourses are about being "kinds of people" (Hacking, 1986). There are different ways to be an African American or Latino. Thus, there are different kinds of African Americans or members of any other cultural group. To be a policeman is to act out being a particular kind of person. So is being a "tough cop," which is talking and acting as "sub-kind" of person within the "kind" of being a policeman. Being a SPED ("Special Ed") student is one way to be a kind of student: it is one kind of student. There are kinds within kinds.

Different kinds of people appear in history, and some disappear. At one time in history, in England and the United States, you could be recognized as a witch, if you "talked the talked" and "walked the walk" (and in some cases you might do so unintentionally). Now it is much harder to be recognized as a witch in many of the places where it was once much easier, though there are still places in the world where you may be recognized as a witch. That "kind" of person has largely disappeared in England and the United States.

The main point of taking about Discourses is to focus on the fact that when people "mean" things to each other, there is always more than language at stake. To mean something to someone else (or even to myself) I have to communicate *who* I am in the sense of what socially situated identity I am taking on here and now (Wieder & Pratt, 1990). I also have to communicate *what* I am doing in terms of what socially situated activity I am seeking to carry out, since Discourses (being particular kinds of people, and doing what they do) exist in part to allow people to carry out certain distinctive activities (e.g., for a policeman, arresting people; for a Catholic, taking communion; for a good student, getting an "A" grade).

Language is not enough for such being and doing. We have to get our minds and actions "right," as well. We also have to get ourselves appropriately in sync with various objects, tools, places, technologies, and other people. Being in a Discourse means being able to engage in a particular sort of "dance" with other people, words, deeds, values, feelings, objects, tools, technologies, places, and times so as to be recognized as a distinctive sort of *who* doing a distinctive sort of *what.* Being able to understand a Discourse means being able to recognize and participate in such "dances."

Discourses are not units or tight boxes with neat boundaries. Rather they are *ways of recognizing and getting recognized* as certain sorts of *whos* doing certain sorts of *whats*. One and the same "dance" may be recognized in multiple ways: in partial ways, in contradictory ways, in disputed ways, in negotiable ways, and so forth through all the multiplicities and problematics postmodernism has made so popular. Discourses, then, are matters of enactment and recognition.

All recognition processes have to satisfy a variety of constraints in probabilistic and sometimes partial ways. For example, something recognized as a "weapon" (e.g., a baseball bat or a fireplace poker) may share some features with prototypical weapons (e.g., a gun, sword, or club) and not share other features. And there may be disagreement about the matter. Furthermore, the very same object might be recognized as a weapon in one context and not in another. So, too, with being in and out of Discourses, for example, enacting and recognizing being-doing a certain type of street gang member, Special Ed student, or particle physicist.

While there is an endless array of Discourses in the world, nearly all human beings, except under extraordinary conditions, acquire early in life an initial Discourse within whatever constitutes their primary socializing unit. Early in life, we all learn a culturally distinctive way of being an "everyday person" as a member of our family and community. We can call this our "primary Discourse." Our primary Discourse gives us our initial and often enduring sense of self and sets the foundations of our culturally specific vernacular language (our "everyday language"), the language in which we speak and act as "everyday" (non-specialized) people.

As a person grows up, lots of interesting things can happen to his or her primary Discourse. Primary Discourses can change, hybridize with other Discourses, and they may even die. In any case, for the vast majority of us, our primary Discourse, through all its transformations, serves us throughout life as what I will call our "lifeworld Discourse" (Habermas, 1984). Our lifeworld Discourse is the way that we use language, feel and think, act and interact, and so forth, in order to be an "everyday" (non-specialized) person. In our pluralistic world there is much adjustment and negotiation as people seek to meet in the terrain of the "lifeworld," given that lifeworlds are culturally distinctive—that is, different groups of people have different ways of being-doing "everyday people."

All the Discourses we acquire later in life, beyond our primary Discourse, we acquire within a more "public sphere" than our initial socializing group. We can call these "secondary Discourses." They are acquired within institutions that are part and parcel of wider communities, whether these communities be religious groups, community organizations, schools, businesses, or governments.

As we are being socialized early in life, secondary Discourses very often play an interesting role. Primary Discourses work out, over time, alignments and allegiances with and against other Discourses, alignments and allegiances that shape them as they, in turn, shape these other Discourses.

One way that many social groups achieve an alignment with secondary Discourses they value is by incorporating certain aspects of the practices of these secondary Discourses into the early (primary Discourse) socialization of their children. For example, some African

American families incorporate aspects of the practices and values of African American churches into their primary Discourse, just as my family incorporated aspects of the practices and values of a very traditional Catholicism into our primary Discourse. This is an extremely important mechanism in terms of which bits and pieces of a valued "community" identity or "public" identity (to be more fully practiced later in the child's life) are incorporated into the child's "private," "home-based," "lifeworld" identity.

Social groups that are deeply affiliated with formal schooling often incorporate into the socialization of their children practices that resonate with later school-based secondary Discourses. For example, their children are encouraged (and coached) from an early age at dinner time to tell in quite expository ways stories that are rather like little essays; and parents interact with their children over books in ways that encourage a great deal of labeling and the answering of a variety of types of questions, as well as the forming of intertextual relationships between books, and between books and the world.

There are, of course, complex relationships between people's primary Discourses and the secondary ones they are acquiring, as well as among their academic, institutional, and community-based secondary Discourses. For example, when they go to school children acquire a secondary Discourse that involves the identity of being a student of a certain kind and using certain kinds of "school language." This identity and these forms of language can, at certain points, conflict with the identities, values, and ways with words which some children have learned at home as part of their primary Discourse. For other children there is a much better fit or match.

Here is one example of such a conflict (Scollon & Scollon, 1981). In some Native American groups, people of a subordinate status remain quiet in the presence of elders or those of a higher status who display their knowledge by speaking. School often requires children to display their knowledge by speaking to the teacher so that she can assess it. But the teacher is of higher status, the authority figure, and the child's home-based Discourse dictates listening, not speaking and displaying, in this sort of context.

Discourses can mix or be ambiguous. For example, an African American running for office might, in a church, be speaking and acting from a mixture of a church Discourse—seeking to get recognized as a Christian of a certain sort—and a political Discourse—seeking to get recognized as a politician of a certain sort. Or there may be ambiguity about which Discourse is in play at which time. When people speak and act they are "bidding" to be recognized as a certain kind of person; the "bid" may not always be successful, or the person may be recognized in different ways than he or she intended.

SEE ALSO: Context in the Analysis of Discourse and Interaction; Critical Discourse Analysis; Discourse and Identity; Language and Identity; Language, Culture, and Context; Sociocultural Theory

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