DISCOURSE THEORY AND PRACTICE: A READER

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Summary

This book is a useful guide and introduction to discourse theory. There is a companion to this reader – *Discourse as Data* (2001) which focuses on the methodology. The two book together act as a compendium for any post graduate student or researcher who wants to know about discourse analysis and its contribution. This book is divided into four parts. Each part centres on a particular theme and is accompanied by an editor's introduction. The Editor's introduction defines the aim, states the theme and also provides a summary of each reading. Further it provides critical perspective to each reading and underlines the relationship between the articles thereby locating

it. The book contains over 25 classic examples (Hall, 1997; Goffman, 1981; Sacks, 1992; Silverman, 1997; Gumperz, 1982; Tannen, 1993; Kitzinger& Frith, 1999; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Billing, 1997; Wertsch, 1990; Edwards, 1997; Gergen, 1994; Davies & Harre, 1990; Hollway, 1984; Hodge & Kress, 1988; Van Dijk, 1993; Shapiro,1989; Hall, 1997; Mehan, 1996; Miller & Rose, 1988;)of studies in discourse analysis.

The book focuses on three topic areas namely,

a. social interaction ,

b. study of mind selves and sense making and

c. study of culture and social relations.

The book is divided into four sections. Part One is called foundations and building blocks. The aim of this section is to introduce some of the core themes. Reading One is by Magaret Wetherell and is entitled *Themes in Discourse Research: The Case of Diana* .This paper introduces discourse as social action. She examines an extract from Princess Diana's interview with Bashir. Here Wetherell shows how the Princess through her 'talk' constructs identities. Wetherell negates the notion of   language working like picture- it does not represent the world rather it builds objects, worlds and people. A central point that Wetherell makes is that language is constructive. She goes on to discuss how language works and also about the sources of order and patterning. What is interesting about her style is that she uses a number of questions in her article which lends it a oral lecture - like quality.

The next six readings locate discourse in its historical context. Gunther Kress in *From Saussure to Critical Sociolinguistics: The Turn Towards a Social View of Language* shows how Saussure's work made linguistics asocial and goes on to discuss the work of Gumperz , Labov and Halliday. He goes back to history and traces the development of sociolinguistics and highlighting how contemporary existing linguistic theories stood in its way of development. The next article which is written by Jonathan Potter is entitled

Wittgenstein and Austin, is similar as it shows how Wittegenstein's broke away from the traditional notions of language as an closed and abstract system and introduced the concept of 'language game'. He discusses how Wittgenstein's idea about analyzing order in talk was later supported by Austin's empirical study of language.

The next reading deals with the sociological aspects of discourse analysis.

John Heritage in his article *Goffman, Garfinkel and Conversation Analysis* discusses Goffman's research on interaction order, Garfinkel's ethnomethodology and also conversation analysis. Thereby introducing a slice of sociology and highlighting its effect on language use.

Kristine Fitch in the next reading The *Ethnography of Speaking: Sapir/ Whorf, Hymes and Moerman* briefly trace the historical roots of ethnograghy of speaking. He briefly summarizes Sapir (1923) Whorf (1956) Hypothesis and discusses the cultural effects on language which had been ignored by Saussure in his concept of langue. He explains how the study of different communities led to the emergence of concepts like communicative competence and

ethnography of speaking which has influenced discourse analysis. He also shows how conversation analysis was borrowed from sociology and applied to the study of language and culture.

The next reading explores the concepts introduced by Bakhtin . We see Janet Maybin in *Language, Struggle and Voice: The Bakhtin /Volosinov Writings* discussing the concept of language as a site of social struggle. According to Voloshinov language usage is always motivated and is thus 'framed within the struggle between different social groups' (pg 65) this conflict is evident at two levels – at the level of sign itself and its usage. This is more vividly described by Bakhtin as conflict between two forces – centripetal forces and centrifugal the former referring to discourse of religious dogma, scientific truth, and so on. While the latter refers to different genres, profession, historical ages .and so on. Maybin further discusses Bakhtin's concept of voice and dialogic quality of communication. Maybin tells us that language for Bakhtin is not neutral source but is brimming with other people's voices, social practices and contexts. He says that in daily life people reiterate other people's viewpoint and this could be done to support one's views and for Bakhtin invoking a voice means uttering 'evaluative viewpoint'(pg69).

The next article discusses Michel Foucault's approach to language and representation. Stuart Hall in his article *Foucault: Power, Knowledge and Discourse* discusses Foucault's concept of discourse. Hall explores the role of the subject in the production of discourse. Foucault believes that the individual has little control over the big discourse and like Saussure he does

give much importance to the human subject. It is important to note that Foucault and Bakhtin both believe that our words carry evaluative shades of meaning.

In Part two the readings focus on the use of language in interaction. In Goffman's Footing, (1981) we *see* Goffman questioning our assumptions about interaction and context. He introduces a number of key concepts like participation status, participation framework, and production format and so on. The arrangements of these elements form footing. According to Goffman , to understand an utterance we need to go beyond the study of its linguistic structure and see the ways one is required to shift 'footing.' The next reading by Harvey Sacks' is entitled Lecture *1: Rules of Conversational Sequence*, where we find him talking about the structure of a telephone call made to an emergency hospital. He uses concepts like repair, turn taking, and compares them to social devices which are used to achieve social goals. David Silverman in the next article entitled *The Construction of 'Delicate' Objects in Counseling,* analysis the interaction between councellors and patients in an HIV testing clinic. Silver points out participants assemble context for their talk. He borrows two concepts from Sacks for analyzing data, first membership categorization device (MCDs) and 'category bound activities'. He shows that before talking about the 'delicate' object, speech is 'turbulent' as it contains pauses, 'repairs' of turns. He dismantles the conversation to show how both the participants treat the topic as 'delicate'. In the next article

written by John Gumperz entitled 'Interethnic Communication' underlines how difference in intonation lead to problems in understanding between members of different ethnic background. Deborah Tannen's discusses the ambiguity of linguistic strategies in her article entitled *The Relativity of Linguistic Strategies: Rethinking power and solidarity in Gender and Dominance*. Strategies like volubility, topic changing, verbal aggression etc are sometimes classified as dominance strategies but Tannen shows with examples taken from novels and videotapes that context plays an important role in determining the nature of linguistics strategies. She shows how linguistic strategies like silence, which is usually associated with powerlessness, can be used by participants to exert power in certain contexts.

She demonstrates that the meaning of any linguistic strategy can vary depending on the context. This context should not only consist of culture, subculture, and social strata but also of speaker's conversational style, and constraints of various kinds like textual, institutional and relational. Thus Tannen shows how researchers often link linguistic strategies with 'power' and 'powerlessness' but this relationship is not static and keeps changing with the changing context. The next article focuses on refusal as a complex conversational activity. Celia Kitzinger and Hannah Frith in *Just Say No? The Use of Conversation Analysis in Developing a Feminist Perspective on Sexual Refusal* tells us that women find refusing a complex activity. They clearly state that artful men pretend to misunderstand women's refusal.

Part Three focuses on how discourse analysis informs us about the construction of identity and also about how people make sense of the world. Potter and Wetherell explore the notion of attitude in their article *Unfolding Discourse Analysis*. They discuss how surveys conducted on attitude work have ignored 'the active use of language in everyday life' (Wetherell, Taylor, Yates, 2001) and they analyze the techniques used by researchers to show how they often produce faulty data. Potter and Wetherell state that , 'we are not trying to recover events, beliefs and cognitive processes from participants' discourse or treat language as an indicator or signpost to some other state of affairs but looking at analytically prior question of how discourse or accounts of these things are manufactured'. (Wetherell, Taylor, Yates, 2001) They give the example of research done on attitude , the aim is to find out not what attitude a person believes but on what occasion does one espouse a certain attitude, the purpose that this achieves and the how accounts are constructed. Tannen sees discourse analysis as an objective methodology. In contrast Teun Van Djik in Section Four of the book discusses the principles of Critical Discourse Analysis and emphatically declares that CDA is not and cannot be 'neutral'. He states that 'the point of critical discourse analysis is to take a position' (Van Dijk, 2001). Next he goes on to analyze an extract from a parliamentary debate held in The British House of Commons. The analysis starts with describing the different elements of the contexts such as access, setting and participants. He then moves on to analyzing the various parts of the speech like topic, local meaning, style and rhetoric. Local meaning is

further broken down into several levels like level of specificity and degree of completeness, local coherence, implicitness and perspective. The paper not only introduces the reader to CDA but also provides a clear and lucid example of its methodology. The paper is well organized and is written in clear and lucid language making it easier for a person who is new to critical discourse analysis to gain an insight into it.

James Wertsch in his article *The Multivoicedness of Meaning* discusses some of the concepts introduced by Bakhtin like 'dialogue' and 'ventriloquation'. He explains a dialogue between a mother and child and shows how a child includes other people's voices in their own. .In the next reading, Derek Edwards takes an extract from the well known *Discourse and Cognition* (1997). His article entitled *Emotion* focuses on emotional talk rather than emotion as an abstract entity. Next article focuses on narratives. Kenneth Gergen in this article entitled *Self narration in Social Life* says that narratives are a means of telling ourselves and the world who we are. Here Gergen not only talks about how stories shape our identities but also how new stories are often fashioned out and contextualized by old ones. The next reading is continues to elaborate on the importance of narratives and how it positions people. Bronwyn Davies and Rom Harre discuss how narratives construct characters and how positioning is reciprocal. In the next article, Wendy Hollway talks about the Foucauldian discourse analysis and subjectivity. Here Discourse is viewed as a process which produces power and inequalities. Hollway discusses about how gender affects talk about sexual relations.

Section four of this book contains articles such as Stuart Halls' *The Spectacle of the 'Other'* which has been taken from *Representations: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices.* Here Hall discusses the politics of 'difference' and how people who are different from us are represented in media and other places. But he begins by asking basic question like why difference matters? He explores some examples of 'representational practices which have used to mark racial difference and signify the racialised 'Other' in western popular culture. The first reading in this section is entitled *Social Semiotics* by comes Robert Hodge and Gunther Kress differentiate between two levels – mimentic and semiosic. They describe women and through their description inform them about their place in society. The Third reading in this section is entitled *Textualizing Global Politics* and is written by Michel Shapiro. In this reading Michel Shapiro like Foucault says that social reality is constructed through discourse. He also believes that some discourses are marginalized, while others highlighted. Hugh Mehan in his article entitled The Construction of an LD Student: A Case Study in the Politics of Representation discusses how 'otherness' is constructed through discourse which ends up becoming a social fact. He employs ethnomethodology, conversation analysis as well as Foucauldian tools. He says that to understand the concept of 'learning disabled' it is necessary study how this category emerged. In the next reading, Peter Miller and Nikolas Rose describe the working of Tavistock Clinic and Tavistock Institute of Human Realtions. They discuss the

vocabulary used in this institution and the kind of subjective positions that it allows .

Though the book is may not be an exhaustive account, it provides a fairly good introduction to discourse analysis and its contributions to social sciences.

The introduction in the Reader states that it has been designed primarily for masters level and other advanced students. Most readings have been edited in a way so that it retains the 'essential gist' but is easy to understand for those new to the field. According to Wetherell 'It is designed for social scientists'. (Wetherell, Taylor, Yates, 2001). Although it should be noted that this book doesn't always differentiate between approaches within the same field.

This book is a treasure of classic articles from some of the biggest names in the world of discourse analysis and is an absolute must read for a beginner.

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