An Introduction to Discourse Analysis

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1.   Introduction

The word, 'discourse' originally comes from the Latin word, 'discursus',[1] which denotes 'conversation or speech'. It refers to a wider area of human life and its activities. Discourse is a continuous stretch of language, which is larger than a sentence. It often constitutes a coherent unit such as a sermon, argument, joke or narrative (Crystal: 1992:25). 'Discourse' and 'text' are used synonymously. It is either written or spoken communication or debate or formal discussion. Discourse means language above the sentence or above the clause (Stubbs 1983, p.1). In other words, it is beyond the sentence level. According to this definition, a particular language in use is considered to be a discourse. Notices, memos, obituaries, shopping lists, road signs posters and banners are various discourse patterns, which occur in language. Even some aspects of body language indicate some specific discourses. In other words, discourse is any instance of language involving more than just a sentence. "Discourse is defined as any form of oral or written communication, which is more extensive than a sentence."[2]

2.   Objective of the study

The objective of the study is to investigate the impact of discourse on the communication process, which occurs in numerous ways both among human beings and animals. Different behavioral patterns of human beings and animals imply different information. It is a vital fact to perceive their respective responses and attitudes. Some symbols, different postures, tone and emotion also reveal their thoughts and ideas. All such activities and behavioral patterns come under the scope of discourse. Effective communication means one should be able to understand the others, who communicate with him/her. It is now apparent that communication is a vast phenomenon.

Methodology

Methodology applied in the present study is literary survey and observation. It is partly primary data based and partly secondary data based. Relevant books and websites were referred to regarding the study. Some authors have defined discourse analysis in many ways, but generally, they reveal the same thing. All such definitions were included in the present study.

3.   Presentation and data analysis

Members of a speech community use language in different ways according to the activities and situations they are involved in. Discourse analysis means investigating such a language within their particular contexts. Language form and language function are very significant in discourse analysis. Under this, both spoken interaction and written texts can be examined. Language form and language function are not the same. In other words, language form is the direct meaning and language function is the indirect meaning. It identifies linguistic features that characterize different genres as well as social and cultural factors that aid in our interpretation.[3]

Use of language varies according to a particular activity or situation. For instance, the way language is used in a funeral is different from the way it is used in a wedding ceremony. The vocabulary used by the people, emotion of the participants, their tone and behavior we find in a funeral are quite different from those of a wedding. Language used in an alms giving, sports meet, garage, temple, hostel, classroom, market and bus stand differs from situation to situation.

The focus of discourse analysis is any form of written or spoken language, such as a conversation or newspaper article. The main topic of interest is the underlying social structures, which may be assumed or played out within the conversation or text. It concerns the sorts of tools and strategies people use when engaged in communication, such as slowing one's speech for emphasis, use of metaphors, and choice of particular words to display.

According to the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, discourse means the use of language in speech and writing in order to produce meaning (Hornby, 1948: p.434).[4] Discourse analysis or discourse studies, is a general term for a number of approaches to analyze written, spoken or signed language use.

Discourse analysis has been taken up in a variety of social science disciplines, including linguistics, anthropology, sociology, cognitive psychology, social psychology, international relations, communication studies and translation studies, each of which is subject to its own assumptions, dimensions of analysis, and methodologies.

When a person communicates with another person verbally, in writing or using a sign language, sometimes the listener has to think more deeply about the meanings of

such words as they indicate an indirect meaning.[5] That is why it is mentioned at the very beginning that discourse is bigger than language. In other words, discourse conveys an extensive meaning rather than a linguistic meaning, which occurs in the given sentence. This can be expressed verbally, in writing and through sign languages.[6]

Discourse in context may consist of only one or two words as in *Stop* or *No smoking*. But, when the people see them, they will suddenly respond. No one orders them to do it; however, they will obey. There are many such examples around us.

- No admission
- Exit
- Silence
- No parking
- Lecture in progress

The above words, phrases and symbols provide us with some information. Only those, who have previous experience and knowledge of such activities or situations, will respond to them positively. Others will fail to do so due to their lack of experience and knowledge regarding them.

4.1   Language and Discourse

Alistair Pennycook[7] says that discourse occurs in language and the problem, which arises here, is what is bigger, language or discourse. In linguistics, language is bigger as discourses occur within language. However, in many instances, discourse seems to be bigger than language as it conveys different meanings.

Zellig Harris,[8] *(Pl. 01)* who was one of Chomsky's teachers paved the way for linguists to analyse language above the sentence level, calling this unit of analysis 'discourse'. Analysis, therefore, focuses on language in use, the relation of language to context and the relations of cohesion within a text. However, Michel Foucault (1972) argues that discourse is bigger than language. Regarding this particular fact, it is difficult to arrive at a conclusion. Anyway, it is obvious that discourse is a substantial phenomenon in language.

4.2   Institutionalized way of thinking

According to Michel Foucault (1972) *(Pl. 02)*, a discourse is considered to be an institutionalized way of thinking. For example, two institutions may have two different attitudes towards a particular guerrilla movement describing it either as freedom fighters or terrorists. LTTE in Sri Lanka is such a movement. International communities and local communities have different attitudes towards it. Some people consider it as a terrorist organization, whereas the others accept it as a liberation movement. This conception of discourse is largely derived from the work of French philosopher Michel Foucault.

Discourse analysis is a term, which refers to different interpretations for scholars working in different disciplines. For a sociolinguist, it is concerned mainly with the structure of social interaction manifested in conversation. Their principal concern is to examine how any language produced by man, whether spoken or written, is used to communicate for a purpose in a context. The discussion is carefully illustrated throughout by a wide variety of discourse types such as conversations in different social situations, extracts from newspapers, notices, contemporary fiction and graffiti.

Language is used rather than what its components of language are (Yule, 1985: p.139) *(Pl. 03)*. Under discourse analysis, linguistic aspects are not investigated. Only the use of language is considered. In other words, the field of discourse and related activity or situation engaged in through language is discussed. Language, a person should select according to the field of discourse is independent from his social variables.

In the study of language, some of the most interesting questions arise in connection with the way language is used rather than what its components are. Hence, the interpretation of all discourse in a sentence is very significant as discussed earlier. Discourse analysis means interpreting a discourse embedded in a specific language. Accordingly, we can easily identify whether it is an obituary notice, tender notice, poster, formal letter, informal letter, receipt, bill, memo, poem, song, drama, review, telegram, admission card, brochure, news bulletin etc

4.3   Discourse Coherence and Cohesion

Coherence and cohesion are terms used in discourse analysis. A piece of writing is coherent if it is clearly organized and has a logical sequence of propositions or ideas. Teun A. van Dijk[9] *(Pl. 04)* who is a professor of Critical Discourse Analysis points out that coherence is a semantic property of discourse formed through the interpretation of

each individual sentence relative to the interpretation of other sentences, with interpretation implying interaction between the text and the reader.

Paragraph or section of text is cohesive if the sentences are well structured, well linked together and there is no unnecessary repetition. Ordered sequence of propositions, phonological, morphological syntactic and lexical structures of the respective sentences, word order, sentence order, use of connectives, nouns, pronouns, adjectives, verbs, adverbs, prepositions, tenses, punctuation, pronunciation etc... are the devices, which are often subsumed under the concept of surface structure, which is known as cohesion.

Generally, discourse has a sequence of sentences, which expresses sequences of propositions or ideas (Beaugrande: 1981). They are logically related and well - organized. Sentences are thus related so as to form the meaning of the paragraph and how the meanings of sentences are related so as to form the meaning of the sequence as a whole. In other words, how the propositions of a discourse are linked up in a sequence in order to add up to more complex meanings. The meaning of one sentence depends on the meaning of a sequence. It is an important task for a speaker or writer to represent these relations between the facts as relations within or among propositions and to express them (Levelt: 1981), whereas the hearer or reader has the task of establishing these relations the other way around with the additional knowledge about the usual ordering of facts. Hence, a discourse is not just a set of sentences, but an ordered sequence of propositions. It is now apparent that coherence is closely associated with meaning and cohesion with grammar. In other words, coherence means semantically related and cohesion means grammatically related.

Zellig Harris
(1909 1992)
(Pl. 01)

Michel Foucault
(1926-1984)
(Pl. 02)

George Yule
(1871-1952)
(Pl. 03)

Teun A. van Dijk
(1943 -)
(Pl. 04)

Text-1

A	My car broke down yesterday.
B	I called for a mechanic.

Text- 2

A	My car broke down yesterday.
B	Obama visited Latin America.

In Text - 1, the meaning of the first sentence depends on the meaning of the second sentence. There is also cause and effect in it. However, in Text-2, there is neither cause nor consequence. Hence, it has no meaning at all as the two sentences are not properly connected. In other words, there is coherence in Text-1 whereas Text-2 has no any coherence. This implies that discourse is not merely a string of sentences. There should be both coherence and cohesion for a meaningful discourse.

For each sentence of the discourse, as well as for the discourse as a whole, it should be indicated to the hearer, at both the semantic (coherence) and surface structural (cohesion) levels, how each sentence relates to previous and possibly following sentences, how the information of each sentence is tied in with the information of other sentences, and what information the hearer or reader is supposed by the speaker or writer to have about the context and about the world. This means, among other things that at each point of the discourse there should be at least some new information and this new information should be appropriately linked with old information, which may be textual or contextual.

The applied aspect of the investigation is to explore how coherence is achieved in different registers and genres of spoken and written discourse; namely face-to-face conversation, telephone conversation, panel discussions, political speeches, media discourse and academic writing.

Discourse is not only semantics of natural language utterances or acts, but also of nonverbal or paraverbal behavior, such as gestures, pictures and films, logical systems or computer languages, sign languages of the deaf, and perhaps social interaction in general.

4.4 Previous Experience

Language users have previous experience, such as having read or heard other discourses about the same kinds of facts, and traces of the representations of these experiences gradually build and update models of the situations. That is why they are capable of understanding the nature of the discourse. Hence, previous knowledge or experience is very important to a person to realize what the discourse is. It is also instrumental in the analysis of the discourse. Language user thus understands the discourse with his previous knowledge and experience (Beaugrande: 1981).

For instance imagine that your father came home after a long journey and says, 'Open the windows please.' removing his shirt. His behavior and speech indicate that it is very hot inside the living room and he needs fresh air to come in. It is now apparent that the sentence, 'Open the windows please.' is not a mere sentence. It is a particular discourse within a language. The meaning of that sentence can be analyzed as indicated below.

It is very hot inside the living room. He feels uncomfortable. Therefore, he requests his wife and children to open the windows.

In this sentence, linguistic meaning is just opening the windows, but the intended meaning or speaker meaning is wider. Father feels it very hot inside the living room and wants them to open the windows. People with such experience only, realize what he says. Hence, the listeners and audiences should have that experience in their lives. Otherwise, they fail to understand what the speaker says. In other words, they should be able to interpret the discourse embedded in father's utterance. The same phenomenon is discussed under pragmatics as well. This shows us that both pragmatics and discourse are closely related though they are studied under different themes. Even semantics and semiotics are closely related to discourse as they are all involved in the concept of meaning.

Text-1

COSTA – ASELA (USA). Son of late Gerald and late Susila de Costa, son-in-law of late S. A. Gnanissara and of Sumana Gnanissara, loving husband of Swarna, dearly beloved father of Moditha and Dumindu, brother of Reena, late Yasonanda and of Upali, father-in-law of Sunita and Dayantha, beloved uncle of Indunil, grandfather of Amaiya, Dilini, Thamali, Rahul, Thilan and Roshan, expired. The remains lie at 123,

Veluwanarama Road, Pamankada, Colombo 6. Cortege will leave at 2.30 p.m. on Saturday 4th April for Cremation at General Cemetery, Borella at 3.30 p.m.

We are familiar with the given context or discourse both verbal and written. The following aspects are considered when interpreting a discourse.

- Structure
- Style
- Vocabulary
- Tone
- Emotion
- Intonation
- Diction
- Grammar
- Cohesion
- Coherence

Generally, any obituary notice is structured in a particular way as indicated above. The same structure remains common to all. When we closely study the above obituary notice, we can easily see the way some specific names have been highlighted so that relations and friends are capable of locating the name of the deceased and the venue. Hence, in discourse analysis, structure or form is immensely vital. Vocabulary found in an obituary seems to be specific. The words like; 'late', 'loving husband', 'beloved father', 'expired', 'remains', 'Cortege will leave', 'Cremation at General Cemetery' imply that it is about a funeral.

Tone is another important aspect, which is highly considered when a particular discourse is analyzed. According to the tone of a discourse, one can say whether it is about a funeral, wedding or otherwise. Emotion and intonation are also closely associated with the tone. For example, when a person speaks, we can observe whether is in happy or sad mood according to his intonation.

Discourses are written or spoken in different diction. It means the choice of words. When the vocabulary of the above obituary notice is closely studied, it is clear how the words have been selected to write the obituary notice.

When the following matrimonial is closely examined, it is obvious that some sentences are not grammatically connected. For instance, in the following phrase, there is no any verb to connect the subject with the predicate. 'Educated in Convent and International School in Sri Lanka, with considerable assets...'

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Though the sentence is incomplete, it conveys a particular meaning. This shows that in some discourses, grammar is not a very important component. However, there are instances, where grammar is very significant and essential. For instance, the formal letters are written grammatically and they are expected to be accurate and authentic.

Text-2

Affluent Catholic parents seek a partner for their pretty, slim, fair, daughter 29 years, in IT, presently working in NY City USA. Educated in Convent and International School in Sri Lanka, with considerable assets. Prefer a Sri Lankan professionally qualified partner, non-smoker with sober habits with similar background, living in Sri Lanka or abroad. Religion - Catholic or Buddhist. All correspondence will be treated confidentially. Please reply with family particulars.

As discussed earlier, discourse means how language is used in different situations or different activities. From situation to situation or activity to activity it changes. We use language in different ways. For instance, it is mainly spoken and written. It is clear that spoken discourse is different from written discourse. This is a common phenomenon in many languages. We hardly speak the same language as we write it. There are some differences between them. Even in spoken discourse, the way language is used varies according to the situation or activity. For example, the way we speak to a priest and the way we speak a layman are quite different. This difference can easily be discerned in the intonation and vocabulary that the speaker uses in his speech. We usually speak to a priest in a very respectful manner using a specific vocabulary whereas we speak to a friend in a friendly way using a general vocabulary. When a person is angry, he uses language in a very emotional way. According to a person's emotion and mood, his discourse pattern also changes. When a person speaks at a funeral, his normal way of speaking, suddenly varies according to the situation or activity he is involved in. In written discourse too, there are many such changes. Obituary notices, general notices, memos, posters, formal and informal letters, minutes, advertisements, pornographic and defamation literature are written in different ways. They have their own discourse patterns. Vocabulary, grammar and sentence patterns, which they use, are relevant to such specific discourse patterns.

4.5 New Cross-Discipline

DA began to develop as a new cross-discipline in late 1960s and 1970s in the field of both humanities and social sciences. It is related to the disciplines such as semiotics, psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, and pragmatics. Discourse Analysis is involved, in a variety of social science disciplines including linguistics, anthropology, sociology, cognitive psychology, social psychology, international relations communication studies and translation studies. The various dimensions of discourse are associated with sounds, intonation, emotions, gestures, syntax, lexicon, rhetoric, meanings, speech acts and other aspects of interaction. According to these dimensions, discourse patterns change.

These approaches emphasize different aspects of language use and they all view language as social interaction. They are concerned with the social contexts, in which discourse is embedded. Many discourse types begin with some kind of summary, for instance in titles, headlines, abstracts and so on. This means though in concise form, they convey some comprehensive information. For example, the newspaper headlines through one or two words reveal more information about a particular incident. The discussion or text is carefully illustrated throughout by a wide variety of discourse types such as conversations and speeches recorded in different social situations, extracts from newspapers, books, magazines, notices, contemporary fiction and graffiti. We should know the techniques of analysis in order to apply them to any language in context that we encounter.

4.6 Ambiguous sources

There are many sources of ambiguity in language as Asher[10] points out. They are lexical ambiguity, ambiguity of function and ambiguity of rhetorical function. They all lead to ambiguity and as a result, listener or reader hardly realizes what the discourse is. Even wrong punctuation marks, wrong spelling, wrong body language, wrong signals and wrong word order lead someone to confusion. When the following sentences are closely studied, it is clear that the wrong punctuation mark, comma can kill even a person.

Let him go, not kill him.

Let him go not, kill him.

This ambiguity is caused by the wrong use of the punctuation mark. That is why the correct use of punctuation mark is very important.

4.7 Application in Translation Theory

The general attention to discourse analysis developed in the 1970s has found applications in translation theory in the 1980s and into the 1990s. However, a survey of the linguistic approaches concerned shows that many kinds of analysis are inappropriate to the study of translation quite simply because they cannot say if a source text and a target text can or should belong to the same discourse. That is, most theories cannot describe the limits of any particular discourse within or across different tongues. A more pertinent approach is to define discourse as a set of constraints on semiotics at a non-lingual level, and then use this definition to recognize translation as a possible index of intercultural discursive constraints. For instance, when a text whether verbal or written is translated, its discourse should be highly considered. That is why a Muslim person, who knows Sinhala, fails to translate an English text into Sinhala. He should also be aware of the Sinhala culture as well. Otherwise, his translation is most probably humorous and funny. Structuralists such as Ferdinand de Saussure[11] and Jacques Lacan,[12] argue that all human actions and social formations are related to language and can be understood as systems of related elements. For instance, when you speak to a person in a threatening voice angrily, he will nod with his eyes cast down. This is also a kind of discourse as Ferdinand de Saussure and Jacques Lacan point out. His nod indicates that one day he is going to take revenge from you. Though his action is non-verbal, it implies his anger, tension and revenge.

Different people may come up with different interpretations of the same thing of discourse depending on their particular knowledge and experience of the world (Paul Cobley: 2001-p.136). For example, two boys might interpret their discussions as rudely insulting, while the boy's friends might call it just chatting.

4.8 Social Distance through Talk

When two people speak, we can easily observe whether they are closely related or distanced according to the way they are communicating with each other. In other words, we can see the relationship existing between them (Paul Cobley: 2001-136). When two lovers speak to each other, the listeners understand that they are lovers or husband and wife. Their way of communication, body language, vocabulary, tone etc establish their real identity. It is their specific discourse pattern, which helps us identify them. Discourse thus seems to be accompanied by the actions of the speakers as well.

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4.9 Functional Relation and Structural Relation

In discourse analysis, the functional relation is above the structural relation. For instance, the following sentences constitute a discourse and we can see what the functional relation occurring here.

Mala Will you attend Roshan's wedding?

Ravi Did he attend ours?

Mala His father was seriously ill and he had to look after him at hospital.

Ravi If so, why don't you go there with your friends? I have to attend to an urgent matter today.

When you listen to this conversation carefully, you will realize that Ravi does not like to attend this particular wedding. He seems to be unhappy with Roshan for his failure to attend the wedding. This indicates the negative relationship between Ravi and Roshan. However, Mala tries to defend Roshan justifying his failure to attend their wedding. Anyway, Mala fails to convince Ravi, who is not interested in attending it. This further implies that Ravi is adamant and not prepared to forgive Roshan, whereas Mala seems to be lenient and ready to forgive him. Ravi expresses his displeasure through the following sentence:

Did he attend ours?

But, Mala shows her sympathy towards him through the following words.

His father was seriously ill and he had to look after him at hospital.

It is now obvious that good qualities of Mala and bad qualities of Ravi are revealed through their own words and behavior.

Through this dialogue, the relationship between language and society is also revealed and the psychological status of Ravi is absolutely apparent.

4.10   Language Functions

There are two fundamental language functions (Brown and Yule: 1983), namely transactional function and interactional function. Transactional function means communication of information, which is of two kinds, objective information and subjective information. Objective information is universally or generally accepted while subjective information varies from person to person. For instance, a researcher may reveal the results of his research to build up a particular theory. They are all logical, rational and factual. Hence, this kind of information is considered to be objective. A critic

may have his review on a particular film. It depends on his own ideas and attitudes. It is, therefore, considered to be subjective.

For instance, interactional function Halliday [13] means trying to initiate a conversation with another person.

Hello! Good Morning! What's your time please?

Sometimes, you meet some people at the bus halt waiting for a bus. Some want to begin a conversation with you and one such person may use the above sentence not to get information, but to initiate a conversation with you. There are many such instances in a language. This is common in any language we use. Some other examples are given below.

- I think you are not from this area.
- The price of petrol has gone up again.
- I have seen you somewhere.

4.   Findings and Conclusion

It is now obvious that discourse is more extensive and complex than a sentence. A person should have previous experience and good knowledge of the subject or incident to understand a particular discourse. Otherwise, it is only linguistic awareness of language, he gets. He will fail to get the real meaning of text or speech, which the speaker or writer wants to convey. Due to the poor knowledge of discourse, one may be confronted with great communication difficulties. This usually happens in everyday life. A person should be able to perceive both verbal discourse and non verbal discourse as discussed earlier. It is also found that there are many discourse patterns in oral and written communication. The meaning is not confined to morphological and syntactic levels. It goes beyond that. One's words, both oral and written, tone, mood, appearance, emotion, behavior, silence and posture are closely associated with discourse. In conclusion, it is now obvious that discourse is a vast domain in any language.