WHAT IS DISCOURSE ANALYSIS?

Topic 1

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Discourse vs Text

The terms 'discourse' and 'text' are often interchangeable (see Nunan, 1993; Stubbs, 1989). However, some linguists emphasize 'language in context' to refer to discourse.

- ## Discourse:

- A continuous stretch of (esp spoken) language larger than a sentence, often constituting a coherent unit, such as a sermon, argument, joke or narrative. (Crystal 1992: 25)

- Stretches of language perceived to be meaningful, unified, and purposive. (Cook 1989: 156)

- The interpretation of the communicative event in context. (Nunan, 1993: 6)

Text:

- A piece of naturally occurring spoken , written, or signed discourse identified for purposes of analysis. It is often a language unit with a definable communication function, such as a conversation, a poster. (Crystal, 1992: 72)

- A stretch of language interpreted formally, without context. (Cook, 1989: 158)

- Any written record of a communicative event. The event itself may involve oral language (ex: a sermon, a casual conversation, a shopping transaction) or written language (ex: a poem, a newspaper advs, a wall poster, a shopping list, a novel)

(Nunan, 1993: 6)

Context

- The situation giving rise to the discourse, and within which the discourse is embedded.

- There are 2 kinds:

a. The linguistic context: the language that surrounds or accompanies the piece of discourse under analysis.

b. The non-linguistic/ experiential context, which includes

- The type of communicative event (ex: joke, story, lecture, greeting, conversation)
- The topic
- The purpose of the event
- The setting: location, time of day, season of year and physical aspects of the situation (ex: size of room, arrangement of furniture)
- The participants and their relationship
- The background knowledge and assumptions underlying the communicative event.

Spoken vs Written Language

- *Grammar*: Written language has certain features that are generally not shared by the spoken language. Linguistically, written language tends to consist of clauses that are internally complex, whereas with spoken language the complexity exists in the ways in which clauses are joined together. Spoken language is unedited.

Example of grammar in the written text

- *Like Vincent d'Indy, a disciple of Cesar Frank, Chausson shares with them a dreamy, even idle poetry, sumptuous but precise orchestration, and an energy that is intimate rather than powerful, ascetic rather than importunate.*

(Mordden 1980: 292)

Example of grammar in the spoken text

- *This morning Associate Professor Dean Wolfe will talk about the science of music at half-past eleven, and we'll hear some fascinating things such as mucisians playing music backwards – but most of it will be played forwards!*

(Nunan, p. 10)

Spoken vs Written Language

- *Lexical Density* (the number of lexical or content words per clause):

  Spoken and written language also differ in the ratio of content words (N & V) to grammatical or function words (prep, pron & art). Written language is more dense than the spoken.

Example of lexical density in written text

- *The use of this method of control unquestioneably leads to safer and faster trains running in the most adverse weather conditions.*

- The number of lexical or content words in the single clause above is twelve and therefore the text has lexical density of twelve.

Example of lexical density in spoken version text

You can control the trains this way

and if you do that

you can be quite sure

that they'll be able to run more safely and more quickly

than they would otherwise

no matter how bad the weather gets

Example of lexical density in spoken version text

- The number of the content words is 10, which are distributed into six clauses
- The lexical density of the text is less than two

Spoken vs Written Language

- *Situation*: With written language there is no common situation, as there is in face-to-face interaction. The situation therefore has to be inferred from the text. The words themselves must carry all of the shades of meaning which in face-to-face interaction can be conveyed by non-verbal behavior.

Example 1

Annie,

Gone to the deli for milk. Back in a tick.

Go in and make yourself at home

- Theo

(Nunan, p.9)

Example 2

At times one's preoccupation with averages can cause one to lose sight of the fact that many of the most important workaday decisions are based on considerations of the extremes rather than on the middle of a distribution.

(Nunan, p.10)

Types of Discourse

a. Transactional language: occurs when the participants are concerned with the exchange of goods and services.

b. Interpersonal language: occurs when the speakers are less concerned with the exchange of goods and services, than with socializing.

However, many interactions that are essentially transactional in nature will also exhibit social functions, while essentially social interactions can contain transactional elements.

The use of language can also be aesthetic or expressive like that in literary works.

Discourse Analysis

- Stubbs (1989: 1):

a. the linguistic analysis of naturally occurring connected spoken or written discourse

b. attempts to study the organization of language above the sentence or above the clause, and therefore to study larger linguistic units, such as conversational exchanges or written texts

c. The study of language in use in social contexts, and in particular with interaction or dialogue between speakers

Why Discourse Analysis?

- Language, action, knowledge and situation are inseparable
- Austin (1955): language performs actions (ex: apologizing, threatening, naming, complaining, promising, etc)
- We require knowledge of what speech act is being performed in what speech event
- Language is not to be taken literally; different actions or and social situations produce different language

TASK

Record and transcribe a 5-10 minute conversation between two or three people.
What can you say about the following characteristics?

- Topic
- Purpose or function
- Setting
- Partcipants and their relationship
- Message form and content