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# Discourse Analysis
## A Critical Appraisal of Concepts and Controversies

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## Abstract

Discourse analysis has been defined in various ways but it seems the more the definitions increase, the more elusive and vague the concept becomes. The prevalent and preponderant meanings associated with discourse analysis emanating from its scope and interdisciplinary nature subsequently informing how the discipline is defined and conceptualised has consequently made imperative, the need to map out its terrain in order to narrow down the range of meaning and usage possibilities. The analyst should concentrate on those features that contribute to textual coherence. This paper has attempted to highlight the fundamentals of discourse analysis, shape its propensity and clear its controversies so that the discipline would be better appreciated.

Keywords: Discourse, textual coherence, interdisciplinary, controversies.

## Introduction

Irked by the general skepticisms that greeted stylistics at its golden age, Stanley Fish, in 1981, wrote a treatise on the discipline expounding varied opinions of linguists on what stylistics is and what it is not about. Fish did not only highlight the features of stylistics but also criticise the existing controversial views. All these effort was aimed at creating a distinct identity for stylistics. Barely two decades after, another discipline, also within the spectrum of descriptive linguistics, Critical Discourse Analysis had begun to have its own taste of criticism. Being a Post-discourse analysis approach, critics keep asking what is actually *critical* in critical discourse analysis. In a swift response to this criticism, Michael Toolan (2002) also published an article which he titled "What is Critical Discourse Analysis and why are people saying such a terrible thing about it". Both Fish and Toolan's papers are in search of identity, among other objectives. Apparently, these two scholars might have developed restiveness as a result of comments that seemed to be undermining the distinctiveness of these two disciplines.

As a researcher in discourse analysis, I have also observed same attitudes and read comments from my academic colleagues. More disturbing and poignant comment is the one coming from undergraduate and postgraduate students of language in some tertiary institutions whom I have had a cause to interact with. On different occasions, I had exchanged ideas with students and academics

from various Nigerian universities on academic matters, the chief of which has been on the issue of discourse analysis. its concept, tools and focus of its analysis. This paper is therefore, a child of necessity, an attempt to correct views on the fundamentals of discourse analysis. The propensity of this discipline as well as its divergent conceptual views can be better appreciated through a diachronic appraisal of the discipline from its inception to date.

## Discourse – The Concept and Scope

*Discours* first appeared in French language in 1503 from the Latin word *discursus* (Baylon and Fabre, 1990). At first, it meant intention but later it became known as talk or speech. Analysis, on the other hand. entails a careful examination, in this context. description and explanation of form-function relationship. The *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (2000:283) captures the ordinary sense of the word in these ways:

(i) a serious speech or piece of writing on a particular subject
(ii) serious conversation between people
(iii) the language used in particular kinds of speech or writing.

The terms 'discourse' and 'discourse analysis' in the opinion of Widdowson (2007: xi ) " have become broad over the last three decades used to connote  scholastic activity, spoken interaction, written text, grammar and lexis beyond the confines of the sentence and intonation. Widdowson succinctly makes it clear that he is more concerned with discourse as a language in use rather than the more socio-political inclined discipline. There is no doubt that discourse analysis is concerned with language data, spoken or written (Hoy 1983; Leech 1983 Mc. Gregor 2003). Jaworski and Coupland (1999) draw the argument further by including non-linguistic communicative codes as objects of discourse analysis. Majority of the analysts say that discourse analysis is concerned with language use. This covers deictic and fillers since these two essential speech features are uttered and imbued with communicative abilities.

Looking at discourse analysis as being primarily concerned with spoken language, and considering Harris' maiden analysis which was based on sentence structure, one would agree that the discipline is, from the out-set, poised for trouble making. Harris was not the only one with this view, he has an ally in Mitchell (1957).Using a market transaction as an experimental datum, Mitchell focuses on identifying the phonological features characteristic of market transaction discourse. More attempts at creating uniqueness continue to be made by scholars. Foucault (1972), Fowler (1981) and Hawthorn (1992) have set out certain conditions like coherence and communicativeness for a piece to be suitably qualified as a discourse. Fowler (1981:20) narrows down the scope of discourse to the user. He is of the opinion that it is a write-up from the perspective of the writer. He states that:

> Discourse is speech or writing seen from the point of view of the beliefs, values and categories which it embodies; these beliefs constitute a way of looking at the world, an organization or representation of experience
> –"ideology" in the neutral non-pejorative sense.

The need to map out the contextual usage of the term "discourse" becomes imperative in order to narrow down the range of possibilities in its meanings and usages. Zelling Harris was said to be the first to adopt the term *Discourse Analysis* to a textual study even though, the work turned out to be mostly a supra-segmental analysis of sentences. Since then, this term has been defined and re-defined in various ways. However, it seems, the more scholars come up with definitions, the more elusive and vague the concept becomes.

To begin with, Stubbs (1983) asserts that the business of discourse analysis is to investigate language use beyond the sentence unit. Similarly, van Dijk (1996) has also stressed the need to study language beyond the sentence unit to larger communicative stretches of expression. Stubbs and van Dijk are not the only ones involved in carving out a wider scope beyond the clause for this discipline; almost all contemporary discourse analysts do, thereby, by implication, setting aside Harris' initial notion of discourse. van Dijk re-traces the emergence of the discipline to a much more recent date. He argues that discourse analysis emerged barely three decades ago in early 1980s. His view was based on the fact that discourse analysis borrowed insights and methods from disciplines like pragmatics, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, etc., which themselves emerged in the 70s.

Mc Gregor (2003) is with a similar view. He proclaims that discourse analysis emerges as a reaction against clause-bound focus of syntax and semantics, because language use, to him, is a 'practice' and not just a 'structure'. I consider it necessary to examine some of these conceptual controversies as many as possible. Mc. Gregor seems not to find proper placement for syntax and semantics in the domain of discourse analysis. His proclamation negates the one earlier said by Brown and Yule (1983) that doing discourse analysis certainly involves doing syntax and semantics.

Communication involves an exchange of the right quantum of information between the participants. The centrality of information as the end product of processed meaning cannot therefore be overemphasised. This is why Davy (1978) says that the main aim of any discourse is to convey a piece of information from the producer to the receiver. If discourse is concerned with investigating how language is used to encode and decode information, one is then tempted to ask: Does language entail other means apart from tonic and graphic means? The answer to this question seems to have been found in Hall and Hall (1987:79) conceptualisation of language in a much broader scope. They claim that

> language includes your postures, gestures, facial expressions, costume and the way you
> walk, even your treatment of time and space and material things.

Since discourse analysis has been defined as the study of language in use, to accommodate the features in Hall & Hall's quotation above in this paper is not out of point. This is because those features are communicative codes. They can be meaningful, independent of either the written or spoken code, or in the least, they are meaning – complimentaries.

## Conceptual Controversies

Toolan(2002) aligns with Widdowson (1995)'s position that discourse is something everybody is talking about but which most have no actual knowledge of. It is in vogue but still vague. Fairclough (1995), like Toolan, agrees that discourse is indeed fashionable and it means different things to different

people. He however does not share Widdowson's (2007) view that the complexity of discourse emanates from its popularity. Instead. Fairclough believes that the interconnectivity and theoretical bases of the discipline are the major sources of conceptual controversy that bedevils the discipline. The aim was however premised on the observation that no single discipline can lay claim to self-sufficiency in the process of encoding and decoding meaning (Coulthard 1985). Fairclough (2002) further argues that discourse is shaped and constrained principally by social as well as cultural factors

Mills (1997:1) asserts that discourse analysis could be used to conceptualise a remarkable variety of disciplines like sociology. philosophy. linguistics. etc. His definition of discourse captures the paradox of the word thus:

> the widest range of possible signification of any conceptual term in literary and cultural theory. and yet it is often the term within theoretical texts which is least defined.

Schiffrin (1994) also opines that discourse analysis is a product of a variety of disciplines, and this accounts for why it takes different theoretical perspectives and analytical approaches. Interestingly, the lender disciplines sometimes are responsible for the success of certain thematic developments in discourse analysis. Employing various approaches to the study of language use has led to encounters with different definitions of discourse and with other disciplines which subsequently necessitated the emergence of new forms of discourse analysis (James 2011). For instance, the application of social and political theories espousing institutionalised social. political values and ideologies has given birth to Critical Discourse Analysis and Political Discourse Analysis while the need to isolate and focus on paralanguage, multi-media and modes of communication such as voice quality, motion and still pictures and signs has led to a new form called Multimodal Discourse Analysis.

As observed. lack of precise and concise parameters with which "discourse" is often conceptualised poses a serious difficulty for theorists and analysts as well. Consequently, coming with acceptable definitions of discourse has been a difficult task more so that its scope continues to fluctuate and to be subjected to series of modifications (Mills 1997). A basic fact one cannot ignore, nevertheless, is that the power of discourse analysis is in its inter-relatedness with many branches of descriptive linguistics like pragmatics. semantics. sociolinguistics. and theoretical linguistics like syntax. morphology and phonology .This is because, at intervals. when necessary. relevant insights from these disciplines are used for analysis.

Toolan identifies the following reasons as the bases of this conceptual confusion: (i) the wide scope of description of discourse analysis (ii) lack of clear demarcation between text and discourse and (iii) confusion between what constitutes analysis and interpretation. It could therefore be inferred that the prevalent variety of meanings associated with discourse analysis stems from its perceived scope, and this serves as the parameter used in defining and classifying discourse analysis into spoken and written forms.

Language experts and discourse analysts like Labov (1972), Stubbs (1983), Chafe (1992), Beaugrande (1993) and Demo (2001) even argue that analysing discourse is synonymous with an attempt to study (i) naturally occurring connected speech or written discourse, (ii) organisation of language above the clause level (that is, studying conversational exchanges or utterances - spoken or written) and (iii) language use in social context. However. this third definition of discourse has come under severe

criticism from Labov who says that to say that a language functions in a social context is an undeserved overemphasis since no language can be studied outside the social context.

The question whether discourse and text are similar or not also comes to the fore. Widdowson (1984) and Crystal (1987) uphold that there is a difference between discourse and text but as Toolan (2002) observes, linguists have not come up with a clear-cut parameter other than form. As earlier stated, discourse is a French word, meaning speech while text has its root in 'texo', a Latin word that means complex construction. As times went by, scholars like, Crystal (1987) and Widdowson (1984) associate text with only written materials. The dichotomy between these two forms later gave birth to what some linguists refer to as *Text analysis* instead of *Discourse analysis*. They argue that while discourse analysis handles spoken data, text analysis deals with written data. Labov, Stubbs, Chafe, Beaugrande differ on this assertion. They claim that discourse analysis does not presuppose a bias towards form. This means that it could be spoken or written.

Hoey (1983) and Leech (1983) submit that there is a substantial overlap between discourse and text. They argue that the adoption of *discourse* to represent the spoken form and *text* for the written form is just a convenient label that is not universal among linguists and language philosophers. Stubbs (1983) and Chafe (1992) strengthen this assertion stressing that this so-called dichotomy is a trivial matter of terminology and more of convenience than compulsion.

In spite of the various conceptual controversies surrounding the similarities and differences between what constitutes a text and a discourse, doing a text analysis differs distinctively from a discourse analysis. In text analysis, sentences are treated as isolated, discreet units. Available linguistic properties are identified, described and analysed with no deliberate efforts on *how* and *why* a sentence is encoded in its present form. Text analysis is not also interested in considering factors like interlocutors, process of communication, turn-taking and markers indicating manners of initiating, negotiating as well as ending utterances. Beaugrande (1993) even strongly argues that the imposition of a monolithic form on discourse analysis is increasingly being challenged, though, as observed by Demo (2001), discourse features are easily and largely observable in the spoken form, perhaps, due to the primacy of spoken language.

Again, discourse analysis has also been described as a discipline that examines the relationship between language and society (Stubbs 1983:1) in terms of how verbal language is being used to foster or propel, sustain and maintain human interaction and transaction; or as a discipline that primarily consists of doing pragmatics by considering how context in which a particular utterance is made can determine its meaning (Brown and Yule 1983:2). Appraising discourse analysis from either of these angles might lead to a conclusion that, the discipline is subsumable under sociolinguistics or pragmatics respectively. This means that discourse analysis as a discipline operates a two-way process; the discipline is influenced by other disciplines like sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, pragmatics and computational linguistics as well as some social sciences like political science and sociology to mention but a few while it equally influences the perceptions of readers and hearers on institutionalised texts, for instance, medical, legal, advertising, media discourses.

These are some of the notions held on discourse analysis. No wonder, therefore, that students, when confronted with a myriad of questions about the conceptual controversy shrouding discourse, often ask "What is discourse analysis really about?" Even colleagues often ask student- researchers to change their research topics to pragmatic analysis or text linguistic analysis, because, to them, discourse

analysis does not have an independent and definite identity because its methodology and characteristics are borrowed from disciplines and adapted. All these notions require someone to clear the dust.

Conceptual controversy about discourse analysis is a phenomenon even acknowledged by fore-runners in the discipline. For instance, Stubbs (1983) describes the term as being ambiguous, rather large and messy (Cook 1992) slippery, elusive and difficult to define (Henry and Taylor 2002), and as being 'complex' due to some methodological troubles and complications (Antaki 1994) and as containing a multitude of rather different approaches (Jaworski and Coupland 1999). A discourse aims at one common thing – effective communication between sender(s) and receiver(s) through both linguistic and non-linguistic means.

## The Task of Analysing a Discourse

When a discourse conveys a message in a clear and direct manner, makes use of simple diction, and its message is within the experience and knowledge of the audience, such discourse can be called *Simple Discourse* (SD).Though within this so-called *Simple Discourse* category, one can still find few genres whose messages could prove difficult to decode. An example of this is religious philosophy as a genre of the religion discourse. *Complex Discourse*, on the other hand, is characterised by uncommon technical expressions; for instance, written medical discourse, science discourse and legal discourse, to mention but a few. This classification is not universal and may vary among individuals.

A discourse analyst is expected to describe the language form and how linguistic properties are used to achieve a coherent and meaningful communicative piece. Scholars warn that analysis is not only about transcription, neither is it synonymous with data summary. Analysis is neither about the personal stance of the analyst or his opinions nor are excessive textual quotations as well as spotting features the same as analysis. All these can undermine effective analysis of discourse. Even, transcription is not the same as analysis; it is just a pre-textual analysis for spoken data just as a summary is to the writer's expression, not composed of original utterances.

Similarly, to align oneself with or distance oneself from the text is negative to an effective and result-oriented analysis. The analyst is just to base his analysis on what is said or written. Excessive quotations can also deprive the text of useful comment. Instead, the analyst should pay attention to details of utterances and not to focus on feature-spotting activity. The preoccupation of the analysis should not also be on fact or fault-finding. However, Salkie (1997) interchangeably uses both discourse and text to refer to the analysis of how people speak and write meaningfully. Salkie and Stubbs, among others, are however of the opinion that the data when spoken or written should be real and naturally-connected; they should not be simulated data.

Doing discourse analysis becomes tasking when it comes to data collection, its techniques, transcription, feasibility, validity and reliability. In the process of analysis, the analyst needs to watch against doing a mere data description or interpretation. There is no overstatement that data that are conversational, interactive or dialogic in nature tend to be richer in discoursal elements than the written ones. Conversational analysis is therefore a version of discourse analysis since it is based on a form of data within the scope of discourse. The identification of conversational analysis as a version of discourse analysis aptly presupposes that textual analysis can as well be considered as another version to handle non-conversational written data.

Brown and Yule (1983:21) see pragmatics as an approach in discourse analysis. To them, doing "Discourse Analysis ... primarily consists of doing pragmatics". Cutting (2002) though acknowledges the close pact between discourse analysis and pragmatics in terms of their preoccupation with the language use but he does not see them as too close to be separated. He explains that while pragmatics focuses on relevance, discourse analysis focuses on *coherence* . The concept of coherence, to Cutting (2002) and Salkie (1992), subsumes cohesion because, according to them, a coherent text normally features cohesive devices. Coherence means "connected texts which make sense" (Yule, 1985:106). Yule observes that coherence is a non-linguistic means of making sense of spoken or written texts. Factors like role relation, world view and many other social and psychological factors affect how a text is perceived or adjudged coherent by the audience.

Hobbs (1978) emphasises that coherence should not be only hearer-based. He adds that there should be mutual understanding of the text or message between the producer and the consumer for a text to be qualified as being coherent. In the preface to Coulthard (1985), Christopher Candlin (1997) asserts that approaches to either discourse analysis or pragmatics necessarily have to represent notably, two distinguishable but mutually inclusive worlds in the pursuit of their objectives. The first discourse world is the speaker/writer-based meaning while the second is the contextualisation of language use.

The 'discoursability' of a text lies in its communicativeness, as Cook (1992:1) argues that the focus of discourse analysis is to examine language and context of communication. For example, who is communicating with whom, where and through what medium? The context as a factor draws discourse into the territory of pragmatics as no in-depth meaning could be deciphered from data without considering the context.

Freedle (1979), Stubbs (1983) and Cook (1992) all assert that discourse should be measured by both textual and contextual factors. It should aim not only at providing specific answers to both linguistic and non-linguistic matters but also at expanding our horizon beyond subjectivity. That is, discourse is considered a veritable tool for solving problems from multiple angles. Analysing discourse therefore challenges us to move from seeing language as an abstract communicative code to seeing our words as having meaning in particular historical, socio-cultural and political situations. The continuous relevance of discourse analysis is as a result of its wide coverage, no wonder then that it is ever becoming versatile, wider and more fertile than it has ever been. Therefore discourse analysis extracts meaning from any communicative datum, spoken, textual or semiotic.

Firth is also of the opinion that language is meaningful only when used in its context. He widens the scope of context of situation beyond Malinowski's view by including the participants, the verbal and non-verbal acts, the speech events as well as the verbal effect. Hymes (1967) argues that the form and content of the message, the setting, the participants, the intent and the effect of the shared knowledge among others are the components of context. Meaning cannot be said to be context- free especially if the totality of the concept of communication must be grasped as Palmer (1976:25) notes in his remark:

> For in what sense could it be argued that we know the meaning of a sentence independently
> of the context?

Since the conception of discourse analysis was primarily premised on the notion of speech, early writers in this discipline either based their analysis of a discourse on the speech production as evidenced

in the works of Harris and Mitchel or based it on classroom discourse as in the case of Sinclair and Coulthard (1975). The latter embarked upon teacher-pupils classroom interaction and transaction. This was because the situation was considered a fertile ground to study the speech structures like exchange system, topic change and turn taking.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, perhaps, in a more general sense, identifying and describing certain factors can help create a uniquely distinct identity in terms of structure and analysis of discourse analysis. First, the study of discourse involves the study of units of language and its use through which a coherent communication is realised .It is worthy of note, that the unit of communication is not necessarily even a single complete sentence. This is why analysts frown at grammaticalising discourse. Though, this does not underestimate the role of grammar in achieving coherent communication. For instance, our verbal communication structure is often in fragments, phrases or even words but this structure still does not hamper effective communication between or among the interlocutors.

A cursory assessment of features like turn-taking, exchange system, context, topic change and negotiation, summon techniques, the participants as well as their role relations, the functions of spatio-temporal deictic, among others, are few characteristics of a spoken discourse and which may be noticeable a times in a written one. However, a written discourse also has its own peculiar strategy. The analyst is expected to concentrate on those features that in a way contribute to textual coherence. In order to achieve this, it therefore becomes imperative for this discipline to borrow insights and principles from other relevant or related areas of linguistic study. This, no doubt, makes discourse analysis not only to be inter-disciplinary but also multi-disciplinary.

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