

Discourse

According to the dictionary the meaning of discourse may be understood in the following way:
discourse: 1. verbal communication; talk, conversation; 2. a formal treatment of a subject in speech or writing; 3. a unit of text used by linguists for the analysis of linguistic phenomena that range over more than one sentence;

discourse: the ability to reason

David Crystal (1987) defines “discourse” in the following way

Discourse analysis focusses on the structure of naturally occurring spoken language, as found in such 'discourses' as conversations, interviews, commentaries and speeches. Text analysis focusses on the structure of written language, as found in such 'texts' as essays, notices, road signs and chapters. But this distinction is not clear-cut, and there have been many other uses of these labels. In particular, 'discourse' and 'text' can be used in a much broader sense to include all language units with a definable communicative function, whether spoken or written. Some scholars talk about 'spoken or written discourse', others about 'spoken or written text'.

Geoffrey Leech and Michael Short (cited in Hawthorn, 1992) argue that-

Discourse is linguistic communication seen as a transaction between speaker and hearer, as an interpersonal activity whose form is determined by its social purpose.

Emile Benveniste (1971) contrasts discourse with 'the language system', when he states:

The sentence, an undefined creation of limitless variety, is the very life of human speech in action. We conclude from this that with the sentence we leave the domain of language as a system of signs and enter into another universe, that of language as an instrument of communication, whose expression is discourse...Discourse must be understood in its widest sense: every utterance assumes a speaker and a hearer, and in the speaker, the intention of influencing the other in some way.... It is every variety of oral discourse of every nature from trivial conversation to the most elaborate oration...but it is also the mass of writing that reproduces oral discourse or that borrows its manner of expression and its purposes: correspondence, memoirs, plays, didactic works, in short, all genres in which someone addresses [themselves] as the speaker, and organises what [they say] in the category of person. The distinction we are making between historical narration and discourse does not at all coincide with that between written language and the spoken. Historical utterance is today reserved for the written language, but discourse is written as well as spoken. In practice, one passes from one to the other instantaneously. Each time that discourse appears in the midst of

historical narration, for example, when the historian reproduces someone's words or when [they themselves intervene] in order to comment upon the events reported, we pass to another tense system, that of discourse.

He thus characterises discourse as the domain of communication.

Roger Fowler (cited in Hawthorn, 1992) states:

'Discourse' is speech or writing seen from the point of view of the beliefs, values and categories which it embodies; these beliefs etc. constitute a way of looking at the world, an organization or representation of experience-'ideology' in the neutral non-pejorative sense. Different modes of discourse encode different representations of experience; and the source of these representations is the communicative context within which the discourse is embedded.

Discourse is the cardinal constituent of a culture. According to **Gee, Hull & Lankshear** (1996)-

“A discourse is composed of ways of talking, listening, reading, writing, acting, interacting, believing, valuing and using tools and objects, in particular settings and at specific times so as to display or to recognize a particular social identity.”

Gee(1989) refers to a discourse as an “identity kit” that tells us how to talk, act and behave so that others would recognise us as belonging to a particular community. Discourse is laden with values and ideologies and is closely connected to social power.

Bakhtin's insightful words on the study of discourses bring out the nature of discourse:

One of the main subjects of human speech is discourse itself ... The specific nature of discourse as a topic of speech, one that requires the transmission and re-processing of another's word, has not been understood: one may speak of another's discourse only with the help of that alien discourse itself, although in the process, it is true, that the speaker introduces into the other's words his own intentions and highlights the context of those words in his own way. (Bakhtin 1981, 355)

Scholars like **Gee** (1989) have distinguished between two main types of discourses-

- i. Primary Discourse and
- ii. Secondary Discourse

Marianne Exum Lopez in her book *When Discourses Collide: An Ethnography of Migrant Children* (1999) defines these as –

A **Primary** discourse is the **discourse of the home**. One naturally grows in the primary discourse based on one's membership in a family. **Secondary** Discourses are many and come together in the **public sphere**. We can find secondary discourses in the school. Secondary discourses are acquired as one becomes a member of a social group or secondary institution not connected directly with the home.