
DISCOURSE ANALYSIS AND ITS CONTEXTUAL FEATURES

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Abstract:

Discourse analysis is a significant methodological approach in linguistics and related disciplines that focuses on language use beyond the sentence level, particularly in natural contexts. It investigates how meaning is constructed, conveyed, and interpreted in communication. This article explores the theoretical foundations of discourse analysis, its core principles, and the role of contextual features, including social, cultural, and situational factors. Special attention is paid to how discourse is shaped by power relations, ideology, and interactional dynamics. The study also outlines key approaches within discourse analysis such as critical discourse analysis (CDA), conversation analysis (CA), and pragmatic discourse studies.

Keywords: Discourse analysis, context, critical discourse analysis, pragmatics, sociolinguistics, interaction, ideology, power, text, communication.

Discourse analysis has evolved into a multidisciplinary field that encompasses linguistics, sociology, psychology, anthropology, and communication studies. Unlike traditional grammar, which focuses on syntactic rules, discourse analysis examines language in actual use – how people communicate in real-life situations. The concept of context plays a central role in understanding how meaning is shaped and interpreted in discourse. From political speeches to classroom conversations, discourse reflects underlying social structures, power dynamics, and cultural norms.

Theoretical Foundations of Discourse Analysis. Discourse, in its broadest sense, refers to stretches of language that go beyond isolated sentences, encompassing dialogues, interviews, debates, narratives, and other forms of communicative interaction. Foucault (1972) defined discourse as systems of thought composed of ideas, attitudes, and practices that systematically construct the subjects and the worlds of which they speak. Discourse analysis emerged in opposition to purely formalist approaches to language. Scholars like Zellig Harris (1952) laid early groundwork by exploring linguistic patterns in connected speech, while later theorists such as Norman Fairclough, Teun A. van Dijk, and Deborah Tannen advanced more critical and interactional approaches.

Contextual Features in Discourse: Understanding discourse requires more than analyzing the linguistic forms of individual sentences; it involves examining the broader contextual layers that shape meaning. Discourse is a communicative act that exists within a network of situational, cultural, cognitive, and intertextual factors. These elements function together to provide the interpretive framework through which speakers and listeners construct and interpret meaning. [3]

One of the key dimensions is the **situational context**, which encompasses the immediate physical and social setting of interaction. This includes the identities and roles of participants, the nature of their relationships, the physical location, and the purpose of communication. The medium and mode—whether spoken, written, multimodal, synchronous, or asynchronous—also influence language choice and structure. For example, courtroom discourse is shaped by formal address, specialized legal terminology, and strict turn-taking protocols.

Equally significant is the **cultural context**, which reflects the shared values, norms, and expectations of a community. Cultural frameworks influence politeness conventions, the acceptability of directness or indirectness, and the structure of discourse genres. Intercultural communication may lead to misunderstandings when participants operate within different cultural norms; for instance, direct criticism may be normal in some Western business contexts but considered inappropriate in high-context Asian cultures.[2]

The **linguistic context**, often referred to as co-text, concerns the surrounding language that aids in interpreting meaning. Cohesion is maintained through devices such as anaphoric references (he, this), lexical repetition, synonymy, and grammatical linkages like conjunctions and ellipsis. Without such connections, discourse would lack coherence, and interpretation would become fragmented.

Another important dimension is the **cognitive context**, which consists of the shared knowledge, beliefs, and assumptions between interlocutors, sometimes referred to as common ground. This includes presuppositions, inferences, and mental schemas that facilitate understanding. For example, the statement “I forgot my umbrella” typically prompts the listener to infer that rain is expected, even if it is not explicitly mentioned.

Pragmatic and social context also play a crucial role in shaping discourse. This involves the functions of speech acts, politeness strategies, and the influence of power relations on language choice. Speakers adjust their expressions depending on social hierarchy, as seen when an employee uses indirect phrasing with a manager to maintain politeness.

Furthermore, **intertextual context** refers to the way discourse connects to other texts, genres, or cultural references. Quotations, allusions, and genre blending are common means of establishing such connections, as when political speeches invoke historical documents to reinforce authority and shared values.

Finally, the **chronological context** highlights the role of time in discourse interpretation. This includes the sequence of conversational turns, the historical period in which the interaction occurs, and the history of previous exchanges between participants. Meaning is often built cumulatively over multiple interactions. [7]

1. Situational Context

Situational context refers to the immediate physical and social environment in which discourse occurs. It determines how language is produced and interpreted in real-time interaction.

- **Participants:** The identities, roles, relationships, and power dynamics between speakers and listeners (e.g., teacher–student, doctor–patient).
- **Setting:** The physical location and temporal conditions (classroom, online meeting, hospital ward).
- **Purpose:** The communicative goal (to inform, persuade, entertain, instruct).
- **Medium and Mode:** Whether the discourse is spoken, written, multimodal, synchronous, or asynchronous.

Example:

In a courtroom, the situational context shapes the use of formal address (“Your Honor”), legal jargon, and procedural turn-taking rules. [4]

2. Cultural Context

Culture influences discourse norms, expectations, and the acceptability of certain expressions.

- **Norms and Values:** Shared social rules, politeness conventions, and taboos.
- **Genre Conventions:** Established structures for specific types of discourse (e.g., scientific articles, wedding speeches).
- **Intercultural Communication:** Misinterpretations often arise when participants operate under differing cultural frames.

Example:

Direct criticism may be acceptable in some Western business contexts but considered impolite in high-context East Asian cultures.

3. Linguistic Context (Co-text)

Linguistic context refers to the surrounding text or talk that helps clarify meaning.

- **Anaphoric Reference:** Words like he, this, such whose meaning depends on prior discourse.
- **Lexical Cohesion:** Repetition, synonymy, and collocation that create links across sentences.

- **Grammatical Cohesion:** Conjunctions, ellipsis, substitution, and parallel structures that maintain flow.

Example:

The pronoun she in “Mary was late. She missed the bus.” is interpreted correctly only through the preceding sentence.

4. Cognitive Context

Cognitive context, or **common ground**, involves the shared knowledge, beliefs, and assumptions of interlocutors.

- **Presuppositions:** Information assumed to be known before utterance.
- **Inferences:** Logical conclusions drawn from discourse cues.
- **Schema Theory:** The mental frameworks or scripts activated by certain topics or settings.

Example:

When someone says, “I forgot my umbrella,” listeners infer rain or bad weather without explicit mention. [5]

5. Pragmatic and Social Context

Pragmatics focuses on how meaning is shaped by speaker intentions and social relationships.

- **Speech Acts:** Functions like requesting, apologizing, or warning.
- **Politeness Strategies:** Choices that maintain face (positive or negative).
- **Power Relations:** Language variation according to social hierarchy.

Example:

An employee might say “Would you mind signing this?” to a manager instead of “Sign this” to maintain politeness.

6. Intertextual Context

Discourse often draws on other texts, genres, or media sources.

- **Quotations and Allusions:** References to prior works or events.
- **Genre Mixing:** Combining styles (e.g., news report with commentary).
- **Shared Media Consumption:** Assumptions about what the audience has read or seen.

Example:

Political speeches may echo historical documents to evoke authority or shared values.

7. Chronological Context

The temporal dimension influences meaning through sequencing and historical setting.

- **Real-Time Progression:** Order of conversational turns.
- **Historical Period:** The broader time frame in which discourse is produced (e.g., wartime, post-pandemic era).
- **Discourse History:** Previous interactions between participants.

Example:

An email reply may omit background explanations if the topic was already discussed in a prior thread. [4]

In conclusion, contextual features are interconnected and operate simultaneously in shaping discourse. A comprehensive analysis must therefore consider the interplay of situational, cultural, linguistic, cognitive, pragmatic, intertextual, and chronological dimensions. Only by integrating these perspectives can one fully understand how meaning is constructed and negotiated in communication.

Discourse analysis provides critical tools for understanding language in use by emphasizing the importance of context and interaction. Its interdisciplinary nature enables scholars to uncover the deeper meanings embedded in communication, shaped by cultural norms, institutional frameworks, and social identities. Contextual analysis remains central to decoding the power of language in shaping thought, ideology, and behavior.

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