
Discourse Analysis and the Classroom Teacher

Virginia LoCastro,

The University of Lancaster

Abstract

Discourse analysis is one of those fields of human knowledge related to language teaching that has seen great expansion over the last couple of decades. I will attempt in a short overview of discourse analysis to convince classroom teachers that it relates to the classroom in some very vital ways, involving textbooks, methodology, and teacher-student behavior. First of all, I present some basic concepts in discourse analysis and, secondly, I justify my view that language teachers could benefit from being more knowledgeable about this area of applied linguistics.

Introduction

Both in her talks and articles (see Richards & Sukwiwat, 1983), Mayuri Sukwiwat has always tried to make her audiences aware that patterns of communication differ cross-culturally. Thais engage differently in face-to-face encounters when speaking their own language and foreign languages from the way members of Anglo-American cultures do. This awareness that Sukwiwat has attempted to develop has hopefully caused more than one classroom teacher to become more interested in one area of applied linguistics that informs cross-cultural aspects of language learning discourse analysis. It is my intention in this paper, first of all, to present some basic concepts in discourse analysis and, secondly, to justify my view that language teachers could benefit from being more knowledgeable about this area of applied linguistics.

What is discourse analysis?

This is, unfortunately, not a question that can easily be answered. It is a relatively new field; only about ten years ago people doing MAs in applied linguistics were briefly introduced to it, but now courses in discourse analysis are very popular. In addition to being a new area, it is also highly interdisciplinary: it has come out of scholarly interests in philosophy, psychology, sociology, and anthropology as well as linguistics. This is no doubt one of the reasons for the difficulty in arriving at a single definition. This interdisciplinary character of the work causes a sense of vagueness, yet it is also a source of great richness and diversity.

Essentially discourse analysis is a methodology, that is, a way of looking at language that is longer than a clause or a sentence in length. "Discourse" then is any piece of "text," longer than a clause or

sentence, written or spoken, covering anything from a prayer to a lecture to a TV news report to a conversation. Stubbs (1983: 1) defines discourse analysis as “the linguistic analysis of naturally occurring connected spoken or written discourse.” One of the key words is “connected”: discourse analysis rejects the kind of linguistics that only looks at the syntax of isolated sentences, such as the transformational–generative grammar approach of Chomsky and his followers. Another key word is “naturally occurring”: discourse analysis is done on samples of language that are produced by the users of the language, not by linguists. Indeed, the most frequently studied texts are everyday interactions or conversational encounters with two or more speakers, such as doctor–patient interviews, classroom talk, telephone talk, and casual conversations.

Furthermore, it follows that discourse analysis is concerned with language use in context. The context may be linguistic or non-linguistic. The linguistic context may consist of “sentences,” (samples of written language), or “utterances,” (samples of spoken language), immediately preceding and following the particular piece of language that is the focus of analysis. Non-linguistic context in conversational data may refer to the actual physical setting but, more importantly, the individuals who are present: their age, social status, educational background, and other similar social features. In the analysis of a text, spoken or written, it is various features in the context that are considered to be absolutely vital in achieving full understanding of speaker/writer meaning.

In addition to the context, the shared background knowledge of the readers or participants is considered to be important in processing meaning. In order to read and

comprehend a scientific text, for example, we have to already know some science; we learn new things by using what we already know and gradually adding to that store of knowledge in our brains. In a similar way, participants in interactions need to have at least some shared background knowledge to understand each other. For example, Thais born and raised in Bangkok will have a lot of shared knowledge not only about the content of their interaction, but also about how people communicate with each other. There are certain ways to be polite that Bangkok-born Thais will use and will understand when others use them. These ways of patterns may differ from those of Thais from other parts of Thailand and will surely differ from Anglo-American rules of polite behavior. In English, people use modals, intonation, and tag questions as polite forms, whereas Thais have other means to show politeness through language and through such behavior as bowing and hand gestures.

Shared background knowledge is also important in understanding the content. In the following example, A has to share the same notions about cars, and places where gasoline can be bought to understand the meaning of B’s utterance:

A: I’m out of gas.

B: There’s a garage around the corner.

We have to know that garages sell gasoline and that “around the corner” is not likely to be far in order to realize that B is offering a solution to A’s problem. In addition, we assume that B knows the garage is likely to be open for business. Yet without this shared background knowledge and the shared assumption that what B is saying is truthful and relevant, we would not be able to understand and, moreover,

might think that B was being rude and unhelpful.

Spoken language? Written language?

One important application of research in discourse analysis for classroom teachers has been a greater awareness of differences between the spoken and written language. It has enabled us to look at spoken and written language and, indeed as a result of such analysis, we have become much more aware of the important differences between these two modes of expression, differences that language teachers and learners need to be sensitive to. In the more traditional approaches to English language teaching, for example, the grammar-translation method, students learn the written language. This is problematic when people who have learned a language through that method want to use the language in oral communication. People do not speak the way they write, most of the time. Among the differences are such characteristics of the spoken language as false starts, grammatical and lexical inaccuracies, and less complex syntax. Indeed, depending on the language, there may be considerable differences between the two forms. This is not to say that students of English should learn to use these characteristics of the spoken language; awareness of them encourages teachers to give learners practice in listening to spoken language and helping them be more realistic in the targets set for accuracy.

Discourse analysis has made us aware of these differences and has helped us realize that no value judgements are to be imposed; written language is just different from spoken language, not better. Researchers want to describe what we do in our everyday conversations and to explain, if possible, the

reasons behind our behavior. In the case of written vs. spoken language, there are obvious cognitive processing reasons for the two forms being so different. When we read, we can go back and forth, rereading and checking our understanding. But when we listen to others speak, it is very helpful if they speak with lots of repetition, using everyday words, and clear, simple syntax. In the heat of the moment, we are more interested in conveying meaning than we are in our grammar; we make slips as we are primarily concerned with getting our meaning across to our conversational partner.

Once we realize and understand these differences between spoken and written language, we teachers can help our students develop their writing skills and speaking skills more effectively. We can work from the standpoint of knowledge, rather than simply adopting methods or materials blindly.

What is discourse analysis of written language?

Discourse analysis of the written language is frequently referred to as textlinguistics. Perhaps the best known work in textlinguistics is Halliday and Hasan's *Cohesion in English*, written in 1976, but still the best introduction to issues that arise in analyzing written language: cohesion, reference, lexical sets, ellipsis, and conjunction. Halliday and Hasan try to explain some aspects of English that cannot be understood if we limit ourselves to sentence level grammar.

The value of textlinguistics comes to the foreground in ELT with the problem of training students from Thailand, Japan, and Indonesia (to name only three countries) who want to do advanced study overseas. Advanced study at the undergraduate or graduate level will find the students writing

lots of essays, term papers, and theses. As the norms of writing differ in different cultures, and those of scholarly, expository, and scientific writing in general from other forms of writing, it is imperative that our students be exposed to the differences and learn to adopt the alternative writing conventions. Students who can master the structure of western expository prose, with introductions and conclusions, use of argumentation supported by examples, and cohesive devices such as "first of all," "secondly," etc. will engage in overseas study much more successfully.

Teachers and students then can benefit from a greater knowledge of textlinguistics for the purpose of the study of written texts--literary, expository, scientific, persuasive--as well as for the purpose of the acquisition of writing skills, whether with the goal of publishing abroad or of becoming more proficient writers of their own language.

What is discourse analysis of the spoken language?

Discourse analysis of the spoken language can be carried out in several ways, emphasizing different aspects of the conversational data, although I shall limit this discussion to conversational analysis, whose most well known practitioner is the late Harvey Sacks. He and his colleagues were, and continue to be, mostly interested in the structure of talk : turn-taking, adjacency pairs, and sequences, to give only three examples.

The work of Sacks and his colleagues in conversational analysis has indirectly contributed to the development of the notion of communicative competence. It is undoubtedly common knowledge by now that a

language learner needs to know more than the phonology, lexicon, and grammar of the target language. When language teaching is based on the written language, that is in fact all that the student learns. However, it is now recognized that the learner must know as well how to use the spoken language appropriately in a variety of oral communication situations. Appropriacy, some would argue, is more important than accuracy in conveying meaning and in communicating effectively with other speakers of the language. So the conversational analysts have contributed useful insights about how conversation is organized, insights that have helped writers of materials and classroom teachers in their efforts to prepare students better for actual language use.

Communicative language teaching addresses the dimensions of language in use, seeking to help learners develop the ability to go beyond linguistic competence to communicative competence when using the target language. Students who only learn the written language developing their linguistic competence may find themselves at a loss when they experience situations of mismatch : what they can say with words and grammar does not match what they intend to say. A typical example of the mismatch between linguistic and communicative competence can be seen in the following example :

1. A : Those are delicious looking apples.
B : Yes, they are.
2. A : Those are delicious looking apples.
B : I just bought them. Why don't you try one?

In the first example, B is just attending to the surface level meaning of A's utterance. However, in the second example, B has gone

beyond the words to seek the communicative intent of A's utterance and thus responds in a way that indicates awareness of the implicit meaning, that is, that A would like to have one of the apples. An even simpler example, which is almost a joke, is that of an EFL student who, when asked if s/he has the time, can only respond "Yes" or "No."

Studies in discourse analysis, in particular conversational analysis, have given us a picture of the complexity of human interaction. They have looked at doctor-patient discourse, and job interviews where the interviewees' verbal skills can often determine the success or failure of the interaction. However, most of the studies have dealt only with white, middle class, educated speakers of English for whom it is their first language.

Is there intercultural discourse analysis?

Sukwiwat has contributed to the growing body of work in discourse analysis incorporating data from non-Anglo-American cultures. This can be called intercultural pragmatics. An example is her introducing and ending her talks with poems, which she explained was a Thai way in comparison to the American way of immediately starting with the content or of making some jokes in introductory remarks. Moreover, in her articles (see Richards and Sukwiwat, 1983) she classified conversational routines (*See you later or What a nice day*) and speech acts (making an apology, giving a compliment) according to differences in situations, functions, etc. between first and second or foreign language uses.

Sukwiwat's and others' work in comparing conversational routines and other

features of everyday talk with speakers of different cultural backgrounds have alerted us to possible explanations for problems of intercultural encounters. Actual misunderstandings may arise when the patterns of behavior and the meanings are not the same for the participants in interactions owing to their different cultural backgrounds. An example can be seen in the way in which a listener responds as a speaker carries on talking. According to Moerman (1988), the *khap* in Thai has several meanings: showing agreement, understanding, helpful support of the speaker, or simply that the listener can hear what the speaker is saying. This also seems to be true in Japanese. However, some non-Thais may assume *khap* always means agreement with what the speaker is saying and as a result there can be a serious misunderstanding between the participants.

Can discourse analysis be useful for classroom-centered research?

Discourse analysis is also useful in the field of classroom-centered research, in particular in the analysis of interactions between teacher and students and among students. It is through analysis of talk which occurs among students while they are working in pairs or groups or even doing simple drills, practicing sentence patterns, that we have become aware of how students will often teach each other. Teachers who tape record their lessons and then listen to the tapes, even transcribe them, can analyze their own interaction patterns and make decisions about changing their teaching, they may decide to use, for example, more open-ended questions, to provide more time for students to answer questions, or to give more praise to students.

Discourse analysis has also provided researchers with some insights into how teaching is connected with student learning. At present we still do not know very much about the connection between what teachers teach and what students learn. However, in analyzing transcripts of lessons, we are beginning to get a better picture of students' progress through a curriculum.

Can teachers benefit in other ways?

Discourse analysis is one of those fields of human knowledge related to language teaching that has seen great expansion over the last couple of decades. I believe teachers are more than just classroom technicians--though we may be mostly that at the beginning of our careers--and need to develop background knowledge about verbal learning in general.

Discourse analysis is inherently interdisciplinary: one related field is cognitive psychology and in particular artificial intelligence (AI). AI has to do with getting computers to process written and spoken language as human beings do. In the course of trying to achieve that goal, researchers have found out some interesting things about how human beings comprehend language. One result of this research coupled with that on reading comprehension has been greater awareness of how we understand what we read. From increased knowledge about reading comprehension we can begin

as well to understand listening comprehension as the two are clearly related.

Teachers who have some understanding of verbal learning can be better decision-makers in the classroom. They can develop lessons, write and/or select materials for use, that will help students read and listen with greater comprehension. Research on how we comprehend has made us aware that usually we do not listen for details but rather for the general meaning in most situations, and so in tasks we set for our students in class we need to give them lots of practice with listening for the gist.

Conclusion

I have attempted in this short overview of what discourse analysis is about to convince classroom teachers that it is not just another area of linguistics that has very little to do with what teachers do every day. On the contrary, it is related to the classroom in some very vital ways, involving textbooks and other materials, methodology, interactions, and pair/group work, to name only a few. Discourse analysis is a way of looking at language in use. Teachers are essentially engaged in teaching learners how to use language and so it is reasonable that, the more teachers know about language in use--the way human beings use language and understand language as it is used in everyday talk in all sorts of situations--the more confident the teacher can feel as an informed professional.

The Author

Virginia LoCastro is currently a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Lancaster, UK. She has been involved in ELT in various capacities--teacher, teacher trainer, materials writer, editor--in Japan, New York City, and Quebec, Canada. Her doctoral research involves analyzing Japanese and American conversational data for her work in intercultural pragmatics.

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