The notion of discourse

Definition 1
A term used in LINGUISTICS to refer to a continuous stretch of (especially spoken) LANGUAGE larger than a SENTENCE — but, within this broad notion, several different applications may be found. At its most general, a discourse is a behavioural UNIT which has a pre-theoretical status in linguistics: it is a set of UTTERANCES which constitute any recognisable SPEECH event (no reference being made to its linguistic STRUCTURING, if any), e.g. a conversation, a joke, a sermon, an interview... [Crystal, Dictionary of linguistics and phonetics, 3rd edn 1991]

Definition 2
Discourse generally seems to be used for all those sense of language which, in the words of Bakhtin, emphasise its ‘concrete living totality’ (1981); the term ‘language’ itself being orientated more towards a linguistic system. Discourse is also used in more (inter-)active senses.

(1) Its technical uses appear to have really little to do with the senses recorded in the COD, for instance: namely a formal written ‘treatise’ or ‘dissertation’...

(2) One prominent and comprehensive sense, for which there is indeed no other direct equivalent, covers all those aspects of COMMUNICATION which involve not only a MESSAGE or TEXT but also the ADDRESSER and ADDRESSEE, and their immediate CONTEXT OF SITUATION. Leech & Short (1981) emphasise its INTERPERSONAL or transactional nature, and also its social purpose...

(3) Out of sense (2) in the 1980s came the term discourse stylistics, made popular in the 1990s... marking a new direction in STYLISTICS (q.v.) away from formal analysis to contextualised, discourse-oriented approaches, including sociolinguistic, pragmatic and feminist.

(4) With the emphasis on communication in speech or writing it is often used simply as an alternative to VARIETY or REGISTER: LITERARY v. non-literary discourse, dramatic, philosophical, etc....

(5) With the emphasis on communication, or mode of communication, it is sometimes used in discussions of novel discourse to refer to the representation of speech and thought; hence terms like FREE DIRECT or INDIRECT discourse.

(6) Discourse is popularly used in linguistics and LITERARY THEORY in a more loaded sense after the work of Foucault. Discourse transmits social and institutionalised values or IDEOLOGIES, and also creates them. Thus we can speak of the discourse of New Labour, of the tabloid, of regulations, etc.

(7) In the broad sense of (2), discourse ‘includes’ TEXT (q.v.), but the two terms are not always easily distinguished, and are often used synonymously.

Some linguists would restrict discourse to spoken communication, and reserve text for written: the early discourse analysts, for instance...

A well-established definition of discourse views it as a series of connected utterances, a unit of potential analysis larger than a sentence.... [Wales, A Dictionary of Stylistics, 2nd edn, 2001]
Mills’s comment

Use depends on context/discipline. Sara Mills (1997) locates its use in:

- cultural theory/critical theory/literary theory – ‘general domain of all statements’, ‘an individualisable group of statements’, ‘a regulated practice that accounts for a number of statements’ (Foucault 1972: 80)
- mainstream linguistics (‘linguistic communication’)
- social psychology/critical linguistics (‘speech or writing seen from the point of view of the beliefs, values and categories which it embodies’, Roger Fowler)

The role of ‘interpretation’ in discourse studies is important. Note the adjectival uses: eg discourse strategies, discursive strategies, discoursal strategies.

Discussion (click here) [http://courses.nus.edu.sg/course/elltankw/honours/1a.pdf]

2. The notion of interaction

‘Formalist’ (structural) v. ‘Functional’ approaches

- Formalists view language as being made up of units, and these units are interconnected in some way (‘cohesion’): morpheme → word → phrase → clause → sentence → discourse.
- Functionalists view discourse as language in use (‘the analysis of discourse is, necessarily, the analysis of language in use’, Brown & Yule 1983: 1). Some functionalists try to make the grammar carry the load of pragmatics too.

That function which language serves in the expression of ‘content’ we will describe as transactional, and that function involved in expressing social relations and personal attitudes we will describe as interactional. Our distinction ‘transactional / interactional’, stands in general correspondence to the functional dichotomies — ‘representative / expressive’ found in Bühler (1934), ‘referential / emotive’ (Jakobson, 1960), ‘ideational / interpersonal’ (Halliday, 1970b) and ‘descriptive / social-expressive’ (Lyons, 1977). [Brown & Yule 1983:1]

3. Therefore, this module will focus on speech (as opposed to writing) and interaction (as opposed to transaction)

Labels

- Generic Structure Potential
- Speech-Act Theory (will not focus on this)
- (Gricean) Pragmatics (will focus on face and politeness)
- Ethnomethodology or Conversation Analysis (will not focus on this)
- The Birmingham School (Exchange Structure)

4. Approach:

- Analysis
- Explication
- Theoretical/Interpretive Discussion (objective or subjective?)

5. Requirements:

- Practical Transcription
- Class Test
- Analysis/Essay
- Class Presentation

6. An early note about the exam:

2 hours; the exam will be in open-book format – you can bring in notes and books; I suggest you bring in a well-maintained file. (See fact sheets.)
7. What is the difference between speech and writing?

Elbow suggests that speech is part of our biological package, whereas writing originated in culture. Writing is associated with authority and accords legal status.

The difference might also be emphasised by the different systems of writing. There are three basic systems for writing – alphabetic, logographic and syllabic. We can arrange written languages in the phonographic-logographic continuum.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pure phonography (eg the IPA)</th>
<th>Finnish</th>
<th>French</th>
<th>English</th>
<th>Korean</th>
<th>Japanese</th>
<th>Chinese</th>
<th>Pure logography (eg maths symbols, cryptographic codes)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Elbow, p. 38)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

8. Data and activity: spoken or written? (click here)

Suggest some diagnostics for identifying spoken texts.

(a) Lexical density (Halliday):
Words are either lexical (ie content words) or grammatical (pronouns, articles, auxiliary verbs, etc.) – ‘the number of lexical items … per ranking (non-embedded) clause’ (p. 20)
Ure’s formula is
\[
\text{No. of lexical words} \times 100\% \\
\text{Total no. of words}
\]

(b) Written texts exhibit grammatical complexity (at the group/phrase level, as opposed to the above-clause level)

(c) Textual markers

(d) Explicitness: spoken texts rely more on context and shared information and therefore do not always required to be explicit — at the lexical as well as the grammatical level.

(e) Generalised vocabulary (core lexis) is therefore a result of the above.

(f) Repetition is not uncommon — for the purpose of emphasis, or as a result of the channel (written texts allow backtracking). Structures (syntactic forms) can also be repeated.

(g) Fillers (like you see, er, erm, you know) — words that are almost semantically ‘empty’. Back channels (eg mm, uh, um, yeah, no, right, oh) to signal acknowledgement or understanding.

(h) The tendency towards parataxis as opposed to hypotaxis. Tendency to avoid the passive.

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A corpus approach to spokenness and writtenness

Frequency counts of different registers (taken from Douglas Biber, Variation across speech and writing (1998), p. 15) – raw frequencies followed by normalised counts per 100 words

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>passives</th>
<th>nominalisations</th>
<th>1st and 2nd person pronouns</th>
<th>contractions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>conversation</td>
<td>0 / 0</td>
<td>1 / 0.84</td>
<td>12 / 10.2</td>
<td>6 / 5.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>scientific prose</td>
<td>3 / 6.8</td>
<td>5 / 11.4</td>
<td>0 / 0</td>
<td>0 / 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>panel discussion</td>
<td>2 / 2.2</td>
<td>4 / 4.3</td>
<td>10 / 10.8</td>
<td>3 / 3.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

See also Conrad & Biber (eds), Variation in English: Multi-dimensional studies (2001).

9. A grammar of spoken English?

Is there a case for saying that spoken English and written English have different grammars? Carter and McCarthy point out the following:

- Frequent use of adjectives to modify whole propositions, eg basically, usually, literally, possibly, certainly, of course
- Use of binomial expressions: these occur in a paired relationship and are fixed in order (eg spick and span; ups and downs; swings and roundabouts; cash and carry; hit and miss). There are also trinomials: ready, willing and able; this, that and the other; morning, noon and night.
• High reliance on deictic words.
• Frequent use of delexical verbs: take a long walk, have a swim; have a good look; give someone a ring.
• Frequent use of ellipsis.
• Frequent use of fixed expressions: as a matter of fact, once and for all, at the end of the day, a good time was had by all, honesty is the best policy, carry the can, an open-door policy, as far as I am concerned.
• Fronting or front-placing: ‘the movement of an element from its “canonical” position and its relocation as the first element in a construction’: To that man and his music I dedicated my life.
• Heads or topics: ‘Heads perform a basically orienting and focusing function, identifying key information for listeners and establishing a shared frame of reference for what is important in a conversational exchange’. They are almost exclusively in informal spoken English. In the following, the heads have been underlined:
  - That chap over there, he looks like your brother.
  - This friend of ours, Carol, her daughter, she decided to buy one.
  - The women in the audience, they all shouted in protest.
• Tails: these are slots ‘available at the end of a clause in which a speaker can insert grammatical patterns which amplify, extend or reinforce what (s)he is saying or has said’. Tails have been underlined in the following examples:
  - She’s a really good actress, Clare.
  - Singapore’s far too hot for me it is.
  - They haven’t mended the road yet haven’t those workmen.
  - They complain about it all the time they do.
  - He’s quite a comic that fellow, you know.
  - It’s not actually very good is it that wine?
  - They do tend to go cold, don’t they, pasta?

10. Walter Ong’s orality (think about Old English society)

• Use of mnemonics and formulas (think of clichés in speech)
• Additive (not subordinate) (think of parataxis as opposed to hypotaxis)
• Aggregative (not analytic)
• Redundant and copious
• Conservative and traditionalist
• Close to human life world
• Agonistically toned [Greek, agon: a contest for a prize, whether of athletes, or of poets, painters, etc.]
• Empathetic and participatory (not objectively distanced)
• Homeostatic [homeostasis or homoeostasis: tendency towards the maintenance of internal stability of a system]
• Situational (not abstract)

11. Problem: do the following look written or spoken? (click here)

References (main one asterisked)
 *Deborah Cameron (2001), Working with Spoken Discourse (London: Sage), Ch 1. [In IVLE Files]
 M. A. K. Halliday, Spoken and Written Language (Geelong, Victoria: Deakin University Press, 1985) [P41Hal], Ch. 5
 Sara Mills, Discourse (London: Routledge, 1997) [P302Mil]
 Walter Ong, Orality and Literacy (London: Routledge, 2002) [P35Ong 2002], Ch. 3

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