

## **Discourse Perspective to Second Language Teaching**

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**Abstract.** Has the Language Teaching been able to achieve this avowed aim for the study of language? Certainly language teaching has made students achieve the desired goal of learning a language, through its different methods and approaches –learning to speak, read, write and understand a language. But it has not become a source of empowerment to the student. None of the methods used in language teaching teaches us how to develop an understanding of possible discursal functions of the linguistic features. Neither they teach students about the relationship between language and power, nor do they make any attempt to relate language teaching to the social and political life of the students. This paper provides a theoretical exploration of discourse perspective to language teaching.

Before we go into providing a theoretical exploration of discourse perspective to language teaching, it is important to make our position clear with regard to the notion of ‘discourse.’ Here discourse is understood not simply as a unit larger than a sentence or as the study of language use. Instead it is being viewed as more than just language use –as a type of social practice, shaped by relations of power and invested with ideologies. As a linguistic construction in which linguistic features are not looked at as simply an arbitrary conjunct of form and meaning but as a socially and ideologically motivated structures where the motivation is derived from the interest of the producers of the sign in their social histories and present social locations. Here discourse is treated as being ruled by the conditions of its production and reception and as constituting a distinctive socio-cultural practice that is institutionalized to a greater or lesser degree. It is the ways of using language, in

Foucauldian sense, touching upon the paradigmatic relations (range of options for selection). Why a particular option has been selected and the others left out? Options that move around the binarity of selection versus rejection, inclusion versus exclusion, acceptance versus denial, or represented versus marginalized or kept in silence<sup>1</sup>.

In fact, study of language use can also be seen in Chomskian linguistics. Giving an avowedly mentalist answer to the question why should we study the phenomenon of language, Chomsky points out that the most fundamental reason for studying language is that language is a mirror of the mind.<sup>2</sup> As Chomsky remarks:

There are a number of questions, which might lead one to undertake a study of language. Personally, I am primarily intrigued by the possibility of learning something, from the study of language, that will bring to light inherent properties of the human mind. (1972: 103)

Although in Chomsky's theoretical formulation there are three inter-related theories namely theory of language structure, theory of language acquisition and theory of language use which any detailed study of language ultimately seeks to develop, it is a theory of language structure which has been placed prior to the other two.

The study of language use is also considered essential in Discourse Analysis. It is the analysis of language in use, whether speech or writing, involving both language form and language function. If language in use can be obtained by positing internal or academic goals such as those of observational, descriptive or explanatory adequacy or even through a theory of language use then what are the uses of Discourse Analysis? Perhaps this question may not find any relevance in theoretical linguistics; it certainly has lot to do in second and foreign language learning and several other social domains that are considered as by-product of linguistic inquiry. As a discipline, discourse analysis has a social role and performs both academic and practical function in providing adequate descriptions of text and context. As van Dijk has rightly pointed out, we expect more from discourse analysis as the study of real language use, by real speakers in real situation

than we expect from the study of abstract syntax or formal semantics (van Dijk, 1985: 2).

The word *real* should not be taken on its face value. It is suggestive of living speaker with a definite voice, using living language in a concrete language interactive situation with certain things said and heard and others left unsaid and hidden. If the avowed aim for the study of language from mentalist perspective is to define structural properties of natural (human) language,<sup>3</sup> the avowed aim for the study of language from discourse perspective is to enable students to *say what they mean in order that their voices might be heard (and) ...hear what is said and what is hidden,*” (Janks, 1991: 191) so that they can creatively and critically deal with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world. (Friere, 1972) Has the Language Teaching been able to achieve this avowed aim for the study of language? Certainly language teaching has made students achieve the desired goal of learning a language, through its different methods and approaches –learning to speak, read, write and understand a language. But it has not become a source of empowerment to the students.<sup>4</sup> None of the methods used in language teaching teaches us how to develop an understanding of possible discourse functions of the linguistic features. Neither they teach students about the relationship between language and power, nor do they make any attempt to relate language teaching to the social and political life of the students.

Discourse analysis provides us insights to pinpoint the everyday manifestations and displays of social problems in communication and interaction. In a powerful, though subtle and precise way, it tells us how language is mobilized in defense of domination and the ways in which linguistic features can serve to articulate power relations in discourse. It also shows us the *ways* in which *discursive practices* are used to produce and reproduce ideology in the interest of an identifiable social class or cultural groups and continue to maintain the existing power structure. These discursive practices are happenings, which fall into the production and reproduction of social, historical and cultural life manifesting not only linguistic mechanisms but also devices of a different order, such as those that reproduce ideology and maintain the power structure. It is these practices that have allowed the receiver to take the message

conveyed by the HBO channel on its face value without contesting the hidden ideological intent and hegemonic desire of the producers of the message:

*It is not the Palestine  
It is not the Arab*

**It is the hatred within us**

*Let's fight terrorism*  
(HBO September 11, 2001)

Couched in a craftily manipulated visual this simple ad telecast immediately after the collapse of the twin tower clearly suggests that all representations encode a viewpoint and ideology, even if their linguistic patterns claim an apparent neutrality, certainty and truth value. The message has not only created sharp division between what is said and eliminating what is done, but has also shaped addressers and receivers through their participation in the discourse and has also left its mark on discourse that may not be directly perceived by them but may go through a long series of mediations.

From the discourse perspective it is this knowledge of the language that brings us close to the issue revolving around the relationship between language and power and the working of ideology as a key means of mobilizing meaning to sustain or contest relations of domination in society. Let us take the following example to show how discourse perspective can be used as a means of analyzing the discursive construction of language ideologies in multilingual societies. We simply take the headline as a text published in The Hindu for illustration:

Row Over Hindi Signposts

It may appear to be the reporting of a minor political disagreement over the erection of signposts in one of the major scheduled languages. But the focus on text and discourse practices at work will be quite illuminating. Analytical scrutiny of the text

allows connections to be made with the socio-cultural practices in which the article is located.

According to Roget's Thesaurus *row* is closely associated with *racket* and *riot*. Nominalization of the action here, in which the process is represented as a Noun, obfuscates agency, causality and responsibility. Further, signposts in themselves are unlikely to cause disagreement, let alone riot. However, something about their being Hindi must have caused this disturbance. Because signposts lack agency, individuals or groups must cause the row. The lexical item *Hindi* can refer to a people as well as to a language. Thus the only group visible (metonymically) in the headline is the Hindi group. Implicitly, something about the Hindi group has caused a row. Hence, the only culprit appears to be the Hindi group. This simple example clearly shows how CDA is able to analyze relationships of dominance, discrimination, and power and control as manifested in language.

Language study should, therefore, be tied to its use in discourse. In a discourse perspective to the study of language, students come to understand the way in which each linguistic feature in a text contributes to the overall positioning of the reader. Inasmuch as discourse is a linguistic construction, any focus on linguistic features would highlight its constructedness and would facilitate the process of unpacking, unmasking, unpicking or deconstructing a text. What are those linguistic features used in the construction of discourse or in the positioning of the subject or the creation of hegemony and ideology in the text?

Two things must be kept in mind before we highlight the linguistic features that are to be considered from discourse perspective to language teaching:

Any focus on linguistic features is simply a pointer to the processes of legitimating, reification and dissimulation, and, hence, should not be seen as sufficient for deconstruction of texts. These features should not be seen in isolation. They do not function independent of each other; therefore, one has to work with them one by one in the process of attempting to arrive

at an overall interpretation of a text. (Janks, 1991: 193)

Discourse perspective should, therefore, focus on teaching the following linguistic features:

### 1. Modality:

There are various degrees of certainty encoded in modal auxiliaries, which can provide strong indicator of the power differential in interaction. Two types of modality are in operation in a text, namely,

(a) Social modality, which encodes the speaker's authority and power. For example,

You might/could pass the security bills  
 You should pass the security bills  
 You had better pass the security bills  
 You must pass the security bills  
 You will pass the security bills

(b) Epistemic modality, which encodes probability or certainty. For example,

*There might/could be a state of emergency*  
 There may be a state of emergency  
 There should be a state of emergency  
 There must be a state of emergency  
 There will be a state of emergency

According to Janks (1991), for effective teaching of modality certain questions must be raised which will enable students to understand what modality does in discourse.

### 2. Adverbs:

There are certain adverbs, for example *possibly*, *probably*, *maybe*, *definitely*, *hopefully*, etc. that also affect the modality of the utterance by introducing certainty or tentativeness.

### 3. Voice:

As a form of the verb, voice does not simply indicate whether the subject is the doer or receiver of the action. It is also an ideological construct and can contribute to maintaining and reproducing particular social practices through which specific subject positions for the students can be established. Thus a closer scrutiny of the following preamble from the rules of a primary school:

These are the rules that children are expected to adhere to ... Such rules are characterized by common sense and what is deemed in the overall welfare of the children. (Janks, 1991: 196) suggests that the three passive constructions (are expected, are characterized, and is deemed) are not only presented outside of time, but their active counterparts are also concealed by the deletion of agency. Further, the addressers and receivers are made to believe, through their participation in the discourse, that such rules are natural behavior (*common sense*) and should not be questioned.

### 4. Nominalization:

It is the use of a nominal form to express a process meaning, for example, *detention*, *approval*, *incitement*, etc. Thus, in a sentence below:

These ideas have been subject to widespread criticism  
[Many people have criticized these ideas]

The nominalization of have criticized allows process to be objectified, to be expressed without the human doer.

### 5. Negation:

The negative prefixations, for example, *non white*, *non European*, *non standard*, etc. are not only simple linguistic processes suggesting a negative meaning, but they also position the discourse in the semantic space, which is positive and negative. The positive space is unmarked and reserved for dominant group in society for the norm. The marked term, on the other hand, occupies a negative semantic space and is suggestive of deviation from the norm.

## 6. Tense:

It not only relates the happening described by the verb to time scale, but also bring together both diachronic and synchronic inter-discursive processes that are crucial for discourse condition of production and reception. While the diachronic inter-discursive process is manifested through a continuous comparison of the crisis situation to its historical antecedents, the synchronic inter-discursive process interweaves other discourses proceeding from different present time events. Thus in a sentence: *The police shoot the strikers in Haryana*, the verb shoot not only encodes high degree of certainty and truth but also suggests that it is a habitual behavior. In the following sentences:

The police shot the strikers in Haryana  
The police have shot the strikers in Haryana

shot suggests that action has taken in the past and may not be repeated in future, while have shot suggests that action began in the past and continues in present and may also recur.

In the following sentence,

The university condemns in the strongest possible terms the disruption of these academic meetings and hereby reaffirms its commitment to ensuring compliance by all its members with universal standards of academic behavior.

The verb condemns is singular, 3<sup>rd</sup> person, present tense. The singularity shows that the university presents itself as speaking with one unified voice. The use of 3<sup>rd</sup> person indicates that the statement is objective. The present tense indicates that the university habitually condemns such disruptive actions.

## 7. Lexicalization:

It is the selection of word meaning that is controlled by ideologies. It is an aspect of classification, which is made, not given. For example, in the following text:



In central Australia ...the Pitjantjatjara were driven by draught to expand into the territory of a neighbour. Several of these invasions might be partly explained by a domino theory: the coastal invasion of the whites initially pushing over one black domino which in turn pushed down other dominoes. But it would be sensible to believe that dominoes were also rising and falling occasionally during the centuries of black history. We should be wary of whitewashing the white invasion. We should also be wary of the idea that Australia knew no black invasions. (Blainey, 1980:88-9, cited in Lee, 1992)

Opposition between the terms *settlement* and *invasion* can be seen as ways of referring to the European incursion into Australia that began towards the 18<sup>th</sup> century. This opposition is in harmony with the dominating ideology, which sees the process in terms of European arriving in a land that was essentially wild, uncultivated and unproductive. (Ideology that rationalizes the seizing and occupying of the territory)

There is an ambiguity in the verb *settle*: one meaning associated with the notion of *habitation*. Hence the term *European settlement* suggests that the land was for all practical purposes uninhabited and European advent converted that land into a place that was settled in the sense of inhabited. Another meaning associated with *peacefulness* and *stability*, i.e. European settlement brought about *peace*. These meanings are unacceptable to Aboriginal people. Hence, in recent times expression *European invasion* has emerged as rival to *European settlement*. The dominant ideology undermines the opposition between these terms by referring to the incursions of the Aboriginal into the territories of their neighbor as *invasions*.

Essentially the issue here is a naming one. Basic question is whether Aboriginal incursions are to be seen as invasion or settlement. Both settlement and invasion are indication of political viewpoint. Further example of ideological language use can be seen from the way a group of people are called terrorists rather than freedom fighters, or vice versa. It is not merely the nominal result of an evaluative categorization and identification, but also an ideological decision.

Thus, the discourse perspective to language teaching helps students understand how a preferred reading is constructed in a text through certain linguistic encoding and also how language is an ingredient of power processes resulting in, and sustained by, forms of inequality. It provides a tool to unmask ideologically permeated and often obscured structures of power and domination, their representation in and through texts, as well as strategies of discriminatory inclusion and exclusion in language use. It also makes them become socially aware and conscious of how language contributes to the domination of some people by others. It is this consciousness, which is the first step towards emancipation.

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1. This can best be explained from the following example:

- (a) Demonstrators are shot.
- (b) Police shoot demonstrators.

In (b) agent of the action (Police) is placed in the prime position and the active verb (shoot) attributes the action clearly. In (a) agent has been deleted by the passivization of the verb form. Here it is the recipient of the action (demonstrators) who is the focus and appears almost to be responsible for events.

2. This echoes Leibniz's observation that 'languages are the best mirror of the human mind, and (...) a precise analysis of the significations of words would tell us more than anything else about the operations of the understanding. (Leibniz, 1981[1765]: 330)

3. Although Chomsky has been extensively writing on both theoretical linguistics directed to the study of theory of language structure and politics, it is surprising that his politics does not force him to look at language as an additional tool of exploitation in society. Agnihotri aptly expresses this surprise in the following question addressed to Chomsky in his *The Delhi Lecture Language and the Design*: 'How does a person so deeply touched by human suffering reconcile with considering language as a purely cognitive system rather than as essential component of the sociological power-game. (Mukherji et al 2000: 30)

4. Hence, examination, which is a source of assessing and evaluating language teaching, is also a site of contestation – a site of struggle for arriving at a particular meaning produced in the interests of power; and examination hall becomes an ideal place to test the extent of subjection and

disempowerment and to determine the level of interpellation of the subject in Althusserian sense (Hasnain and Imtiaz, 1996).

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