Discourse and Society:
discourse vs speech

Language is both a social and local practice, and the meanings that are made through the use of language are based in the ideologies, activities and beliefs of what it means to be in a particular place, at a particular time and in a particular setting.
We continually and actively build and rebuild our worlds not just through language, but through language used in tandem with actions, interactions, non-linguistic symbol systems, objects, tools, technologies, and distinctive ways of thinking, valuing, feeling, and believing. Sometimes what we build is quite similar to what we have built before;sometimes it is not. But language-in-action is always and everywhere an active building process. (Gee:

Firth regarded language as only meaningful in its context of situation; he asserted that the descriptive process must begin with the collection of a set of contextually defined homogeneous texts and the aim of description is to explain how the sentences or utterances are meaningful in their contexts. J. R. Firth urged linguists to study conversation, for there 'we shall find the key to a better understanding of what language is and how it works' (1935).

To define context, we must first establish the notion that spoken and written discourse occurs in particular social and cultural settings and is used and understood in different ways in different social and cultural settings. *Discourse analysis* is a research method that provides systematic evidence about social processes through the detailed examination of speech, writing and other signs.

In this relevance and a key notion in the area of discourse analysis is the concept of ***discourse community***. In order for a group of people to be identified as members of a particular discourse community, the group must have some set of shared common goals, some mechanisms for communication and some way of providing the exchange of information among its members. The community must have its own particular genres, its own set of specialized terminology and vocabulary and a high level of expertise in its particular area. These goals may be formally agreed upon (as in the case of clubs and associations) 'or they may be more tacit'.

A *discourse community* is a group of people who share some kind of activity. Members of a discourse community have particular ways of communicating with each other. They generally have shared goals and may have shared values and beliefs. **A person is often a member of more than one discourse community**. Someone may be a university student, a member of a community

volunteer organization and a member of a church group, for example. The ways in which they communicate in each of these groups, and the values and beliefs that are most prominent in each of these groups may vary. There may also be discourse communities within discourse communities. Academic departments, for example, may differ in the ways that they do things and the beliefs and values that they hold, as indeed may other parts of the university.

Discourse communities may consist of *close-knit networks of members such as writers of poetry and their readers*, *or loose-knit groups of members* such as advertising producers, consumers and contributors to *online discussion boards*. Discourse communities may also be made up of several overlapping groups of people. People, further, may be (and normally are) members of more than just the one single discourse community.

Discourse communities also interact with wider speech *communities*. For example, the academic discourse community of students and academics also interacts with the wider speech community of the town or city in which the academic institution is located. It is for these reasons that some people prefer the term *communities of practice* (Lave and Wenger 1991, Wenger 1998 , 2006 ; Meyerhoff 2002 , Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2007) to the term 'discourse community'.

Devitt (2004 : 42–4) adds to this discussion by proposing three types of groups of language users: *communities*, *collectives* and *networks*. **Communities** are 'groups of people who **share substantial amounts of time** together in common endeavours', such as a group of people who all work in the same office. **Collectives** are groups of people that 'form around a single repeated interest, without the frequency or intensity of contact of a community', such as people who are members of a bee-keeping group, or voluntary members of a community telephone advice service. **Networks** are groups of people that are not as tightly knit as speech communities with connections being made by one person 'who knows another person, who knows another person', such as connections that are made through email messages sent and received by people who may never have met each other (and perhaps never will), but are participating in a common discourse.

Speakers, then, often have *a repertoire of social identities and discourse community memberships*. They may also have *a linguistic repertoire* that they draw on for their linguistic interactions. That is, they may have a number of *languages or language varieties* they use to interact in within their particular communities. This kind of situation is common in many parts of the world. The

choice of language or language variety may be determined by the domain the language is being used in, such **as with family, among friends and in religious**, *educational and employment settings*. <u>Social factors such as who we are speaking to, the social context of the interaction, the topic, function and goal of the interaction, social distance between speakers, the formality of the setting or type of interaction and the status of each of the speakers</u> are also important for accounting for the language choice that a person makes in these kinds of settings (Holmes 2008).

The problem of ''recognition and being recognized" is very consequential for all of us all the time. And, as we saw above, making visible and recognizable *who* we are and *what* we are doing always involves a great deal more than "just language." It involves acting-interacting-thinking valuing-talking-(sometimes writing-reading) in the "appropriate way" with the "appropriate" props at the "appropriate" times in the "appropriate" places. Such socially accepted associations among ways of using language, of thinking, valuing, acting, and interacting, in the "right" places and at the "right" times with the "right" objects (associations that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or "social network").

The key to Discourses is "recognition." If you put language, action, interaction, values, beliefs, symbols, objects, tools, and places together in such a way that others *recognize* you as a particular type of who (identity) engaged in a particular type of what (activity) here and now, then you have pulled off a Discourse (and thereby continued it through history, if only for a while longer). Whatever you have done must be similar enough to other performances to be recognizable. However, if it is different enough from what has gone before, but still recognizable, it can simultaneously change and transform Discourses. If it is not recognizable, then you're not "in'' the Discourse. Discourses are always embedded in a medley of social institutions, and often involve various "props" like books and magazines of various sorts, laboratories, classrooms, buildings of various sorts, various technologies, and a myriad of other objects from sewing needles (for sewing circles) through birds (for bird watchers) to basketball courts and basketballs (for basketball players). Think of all the words, symbols, deeds, objects, clothes, and tools you need to coordinate in the right way at the right time and place to "pull off" (or recognize someone as) being a cutting-edge particle physicist or a Los Angeles Latino street gang member or a sensitive high-culture humanist (of old).

Any attempt to characterize discourse structure in terms of functional units must confront the problem of grammatical realization - how do the four major clause types, 'declarative', 'interrogative', 'imperative' and 'moodless', realize a multiplicity of different functions, and how can a hearer correctly interpret which function is intended?

This rule makes clear the crucial importance of *shared knowledge* in conversation; not simply shared rules for the interpretation of linguistic items, but shared knowledge of the world, to which a speaker can allude or appeal.

Whenever we speak or write, we always and simultaneously construct or build six things or six areas of "reality":

1. *The meaning and value of aspects of the material world:* I enter a plain, square room, and speak and act in a certain way (e.g. like someone about to run a meeting), and, low and behold, where I sit becomes the "front" of the room.

2. *Activities:* We talk and act in one way and we are engaged in formally opening a committee meeting; we talk and act in another way and we are engaged in "chit-chat" before the official start of the meeting.

3. *Identities and relationships:* I talk and act in one way one moment and I am speaking and acting as "chair''of the committee; the next moment I speak and talk in a different way and I am speaking and acting as one peer/colleague speaking to another.

4. *Politics (the distribution of social goods):* I talk and act in such a way that a visibly angry male in a committee meeting (perhaps it's me!) is "standing his ground on principle," but a visibly angry female is "hysterical."

5. *Connections:* I talk and act so as to make what I am saying here and now in this committee meeting about whether we should admit more minority students connected to or relevant to (or, on the other hand, not connected to or relevant to) what I said last week about my fears of losing my job given the new government's turn to the right.

6. *Semiotics (what and how different symbol systems and different forms of knowledge "count"):* I talk and act so as to make the knowledge and language of lawyers relevant (privileged), or not, over "everyday language" or over "non-lawyerly academic language" in our committee discussion of facilitating the admission of more minority students.

"Discourse" is different ways in which we humans integrate language with nonlanguage "stuff," such as different ways of thinking, acting, interacting, valuing, feeling, believing, and using symbols, tools, and objects in the right places and at the right times so as to enact and recognize different identities and activities, give the material world certain meanings, distribute social goods in a certain way, make certain sorts of meaningful connections in our experience, and privilege certain symbol systems and ways of knowing over others (i.e. carry out all the building tasks above).

"Conversation" is, long-running and important themes or motifs that have been the focus of a variety of different texts and interactions (in different social languages and Discourses) through a significant stretch of time an d across an array of institutions.

Many models are proposed to account for the elements a speech community is based and operates on. One model is devised by Mitchell to analyse and categorise the process of selling and buying. Mitchell presents a semantically motivated analysis, drawing on in the Firthian tradition where the analysis begins by identifying the relevant participants and elements of situation in detail and dividing the buying-selling process into stages purely on content criteria, admitting that a 'stage is an abstract category and the numbering of stages does not necessarily imply sequence in time'. He describes three major categories of transaction - market auctions; other market transactions; shop transactions - although the second and third are distinguished mainly by situation because they share the following five stages:

1. salutation
2. enquiry as to the object of sale
3. investigation of the object of sale
4. bargaining
5. conclusion

This is an ideal structure: sometimes stages 1 and 2 do not occur and stages 3 and 5 may be realized non-verbally.

It is possible to provide a meaningful structure in terms of Question and Answer, Challenge and Response, Invitation and Acceptance. Thus Labov (l 972a) argues that the first and most important step is to distinguish *'What is said* from *what is done',* and stresses that the unit of analysis is not the grammatically defined clause or sentence but a functional unit, which may of course be *realized* by a single clause or sentence.

Social Practices
Social practices are socially regulated ways of doing things—but the word "regulate" may give the wrong impression here, since "regulation," in the sense in which we normally understand it, is only one of the ways in which social coordination canbe achieved. Different social practices are "regulated" to different degrees and in different ways—for instance, through strict prescription, or through traditions, or through the influence of experts and charismatic role models, or through the constraints of technological resources used, and so on.

Participants
A social practice first of all needs a set of participants in certain roles (principally those of instigator, agent, affected, or beneficiary). *Eligibility conditions* are the "qualifications" participants must have in order to be eligible to play a particular role in a particular social practice.

Actions
The core of any social practice is a set of actions performed in a sequence, which may be fixed to a greater or lesser degree and which may or may not allow for choice, that is, for alternatives with regard to a greater or lesser number of the actions of some or all of the participants, and for concurrence, that is, for the simultaneity of different actions during part or all of the sequence.
Performance Modes
It is apparently not enough to perform the actions that make up the practice, they must also be performed at a certain pace. Representations of social practices are full of such "stage directions," or *performance modes*, as I will call them here.

Presentation Styles
Social practices also involve dress and body grooming requirements, or *presentation styles*, for the participants. Presentation styles may be explicitly prescribed (school and other uniforms, wedding rings, and so on) or not, and social practices vary a great deal in the amount of freedom they leave to (some or all of) the participants in this respect.
Times
Social practices and specific parts of them take place at more or less definite times. Several time constraints are indicated: the social practice of going to school for the first time must take place when the child has reached the age of six and on a specific day, the beginning of the school year.
Locations
Social practices are also related to specific locations: a doctor's clinic, a classroom, a market place...

Primary References

Angermuller, Johannes, Dominique Maingueneau and Ruth Wodak (2014). *The Discourse Studies Reader: main currents in theory and analysis*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Coulthard, Malcon (1985). *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis*. London: Routledge.

Gee, James Paul (2010). *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis: Theory and Method* 3rd Edition. London: Routlege.

Paltridge, Brian (2007). *Discourse Analysis*. London: Continuum.