

A Theoretical Perspective Of Discourse Analysis: Strengths And Shortcomings

Dr. Neelam Bhardwaj,

Associate Professor,

P.G. Dept. of English,

S.C.D. Govt. College,

Ludhiana, Punjab, India

email: neelambhardwaj25@gmail.com

Abstract:

This paper seeks to view discourse etymologically and then work out its poststructuralist postulation to finally place it in the vicinity of Literary Theory which aims at analysing meaning-practices via studying authors, readers, texts and contexts. Discourse being intrinsically political, it can be viewed as akin to Theory as both tend to unsettle established meanings of texts / contexts while remaining relentlessly self-critical in the process. When we focus on the description of a particular language, we are normally concerned with the accurate representation of reforms and structures used in that language. However, as language users we are capable of more than simply recognizing correct verses incorrect form and structure

Keywords: English language, Theoretical Perspective, Discourse, Power, Strengths, Shortcomings.

Discourse analysis is a way to explore what language is and how it is used to achieve communicative goals in different context. It gives us a perspective to see language as abstract with a broad sense of meaning in a particular historical, social and political condition. It is focused on body language, utterances, symbol visual images, and other forms of semiosis (signs and symbols). Discourse analysis does not provide us the method of teaching, but it tries to provide ways of describing and understanding how language is used. It is interested in what language ‘does’ or ‘doing’ rather than just the functions it performs and the grammar and lexical forms.

Literally the term ‘discourse’ signifies verbal communication or conversation. Viewed theoretically, it refers to formal treatment of a subject in speech or writing. In linguistics, however, ‘discourse’ stands for a unit of text used by linguists for the analysis of linguistic phenomena that range over more than one sentence. In its archaic implication, ‘discourse’ can be viewed as the ability to reason and also as the process of reasoning. D. Tannen defines discourse thus:

Discourse—language beyond the sentence—is simply language—as it occurs, in any context (including the context of linguistic analysis), in any form (including two made-up sentences in sequence; a tape-recorded conversation, meeting, or interview; a novel or a play). The name for the field “discourse analysis,” then, says nothing more or other than the term “linguistics”: the study of language. (Tannen 5)

The study of ‘discourse’, or ‘discourse analysis’ is concerned with “study of the relationship between language and the context in which it is used.” (McCarthy 5). Discourse analysis, in a way, draws

diverse interpretations from diverse scholars working in different disciplines. For sociolinguistic, it is concerned mainly with structure of social interaction manifested in conversation; for psycholinguistic, it is primarily concerned with the nature of comprehensive of short written texts; for the computational linguistic, it is concerned with producing operational models of text-understanding within highly limited context. A basic motive in the formulation of discourse analysis has been to discover the regularities and constraints at work in units of language larger than the sentence. This has meant to redefine of the goals of linguistic inquiry as formulated by Chomsky. Whereas Chomsky has given priority to a description of our knowledge of the grammaticality of a sentence, work on discourse stress the importance of a description of a communicative competence.

Discourse' derives from Latin 'discurrere' which means 'to run away' in the sense that it "runs from one person to another" (Chambers's Twentieth Century Dictionary). In late 14th century Medieval Latin, it was used as 'discursus' implying conversation or argument. Nevertheless, 'discursus' further underwent change and made its way into Middle English i.e. late 16th century as 'discours' signifying 'process of reasoning.' The American Heritage Dictionary describes discourse as "a verbal expression in speech and writing." It is interpreted as a communication/ an exchange through reasoning to infer/ convey / describe meaning. In Oxford English Dictionary, 'discourse' means to talk, converse, discuss, and speak and also to write at length on a subject. As a noun, it also means 'a talk' or 'a narrative.' The French variant of 'discourse' is 'discours' and carries more or less similar implications. In literary criticism, however, discourse signifies "a formal treatment of a subject" (Collins English Dictionary) as in a dissertation, or a sermon. Viewed thus, discourse may signify a process of discussing, conversing, thinking, disputing, negotiating and questioning a particular issue, or a set of issues from multiple standpoints. In other words:

Discourse might include any modes of utterance as a part of social practice. They are differentiated by their intention. Thus, discourse may be poetry or prose. It may be a poem, a philosophical essay, a political tract, a biblical commentary, a speech on the hustings, a funeral address, a polemic, a dialogue or an exercise 'in deconstructive criticism. It may be any number of things. (Cuddon 249)

According to Justin Johnson, discourse is an institutionalized way of speaking. It indicates not only what we say and how we say it, but also what we do not say. Johnson's thrust on "what we do not say" has a poststructuralist slant as "what we say" tends to remain aprotic and hence insufficient. Nevertheless, one can construe discourse as a mode of interpretation not only of the written word (or sign if one were to view it from structuralist angle) but also of Derridean 'trace' that opens the possibility of 'what could be said' / 'what has not been said'. Johnson further observes that discourse makes available a unified set of words, symbols, and metaphors that help us "construct and communicate a coherent interpretation of reality." (Johnson)

As stated earlier, linguists used the term 'discourse' in a more technical sense to describe any unit of speech which is longer than a sentence. It was Michel Foucault who took the concept of discourse beyond its linguistic formulation thereby applying it to social sciences. For Foucault,

Discourse is a strongly bounded area of social knowledge, a system of statements within which the world can be known. The key feature of this is that the world is not simply there to be talked about, rather, it is through discourse itself that the world is brought into being.

A Theoretical Perspective Of Discourse Analysis: Strengths And Shortcomings

It is also in such a discourse that speakers and hearers, writers and readers come to an understanding about themselves, their relationship to each other and their place in the world (the construction of subjectivity). It is the complex of signs and practices which organises social existence and social reproduction. (Ashcroft 70-71)

Furthermore, what interests Foucault, are the “unspoken rules” that determine the nature of a particular discourse and also control the statements that can/cannot be made within the framework of a discourse. As such, discourse is important “because it joins power and knowledge together. Those people who have power have control of what is known and the way it is known, and those who have such knowledge have power over those who do not” (Ashcroft 63). Taking cue from Foucault, Julian Wolfreys and others in their book *Key Concepts in Literary Theory* define discourse as a “discussion focused on a specific subject.” They describe it “as language practice: that is, language as it is used by various constituencies (the law, medicine, the church, for example) for purposes to do with power relationships between people.” (Wolfreys 33-34)

The French linguist, Emile Benveniste has viewed the shift away from structuralism in terms of a move from ‘language’ to ‘discourse’ in his book *Problems in General Linguistics*. ‘Language’ is speech or writing analysed ‘objectively’ as a chain of signs without a subject. Benveniste describes discourse as “language grasped as utterance, as involving speaking and writing subjects and therefore also, at least potentially, readers and listeners” (quoted in Eagleton 100). For Terry Eagleton, however, discourse cannot have any definite signified but it still has certain assumptions. He interprets discourse as a “network of signifiers able to envelop a whole field of meanings, objects and practices: certain pieces of writing are selected as being more amenable to this discourse than others, and these are what is known as literature or the ‘literary canon’” (Eagleton 175). If we analyze in this light, discourse is a complex network of signifiers selected and employed in a well-thought out manner supposedly to yield a meaning. Nevertheless, the signified, according to Eagleton, may not necessarily be “definite” as then it is Derridean “play” (of signifiers which is endless) that comes into light thereby opening an infinite field of signification (meaning).

Eagleton further observes that “Literary discourse estranges or alienates ordinary speech, but in doing so, paradoxically, brings us into a fuller, more intimate possession of experience” (Eagleton 4). This is because literature is a “non-pragmatic” discourse unlike, say, biology text book: As peculiar language, literature focuses on a way of talking about a person, place or a context. Eagleton observes that “Rather than the reality of what is talked about, it is sometimes taken to indicate that we mean by literature a kind of self-referential language, a language which talks about itself” (Eagleton 7). This self-reflexive dimension of language is important in the field of discourse analysis and becomes crucial the moment it turns self-critical thereby demonstrating the instability of language alongside “unreliability” and “unfinalizability” of any meaning.

As such, it is hard to delimit discourse in a pinpointed manner; it is as slippery as the entire play of signifiers is and therefore attaching any sense of finality to it may result in missing the whole point. Edgar and Sedgwick view discourse from the viewpoints of linguistics and cultural studies and observes that its implications cannot be confined or restricted:

There is no single meaning to the word discourse, even if one takes it in a technical sense. Of course, a ‘discourse’ can mean simply a dialogue between speakers; but it has also come,

within linguistics for instance, to mean the way in which linguistic elements are conjoined so as to constitute a structure of meaning larger than the sum of its parts. A variant, on sense is also, however, present within conceptions of discourse important to cultural studies. Of the various theories that have been put forward, the conceptions of discourse present within the work of Michel Foucault and Jean-Francois Lyotard are relevant to cultural theory. (Edgar and Sedgwick 96)

At this juncture, Saussurean concepts of 'langue and parole' are of use. Ferdinand de Saussure divided language into 'langue' (which is understood as a system that enables people to speak as they do) and 'parole' (as a particular set of produced statements). According to this division, discourse concerns more to 'parole' as it always occurs in time and is internally characterized by successively developing meaningful expressions where the meaning of the latter is affected by the former. But, on the other hand, 'langue' is abstract. To list some additional traits, discourse is always produced by someone who has an identity. Therefore, the identity of the interpreter is equally significant for the proper understanding of the message. On the other hand, 'langue' is impersonal. Furthermore, discourse always happens in either physical / linguistic context whereas 'langue' does not refer to a context. As such, it is only discourse (parole) that may convey the message and 'langue' is its framework.

Foucault, however, analysed theory of discourse / discursive formation in a social contextual manner unlike Barthes and Derrida for whom 'textuality' of a text was paramount. In the context of the contemporary theoretical debates, the, literal / 'common sense' implications discourse is only of limited use as there is excessive thrust on its theoretical dimensions without of course losing sight of praxis.

Michele Barrett's observation vis-a-vis discourses in *The Politics of Truth: from Marx to Foucault*, is extremely relevant. He is of the opinion that Discourses must be embedded within institutions and subjects, regulated with reference to a particular 'regime of truth', and situated within particular assemblages of knowledge and power, yet are open to dispute. Basically They are worried about not only meaning and context but also content and the practices of numerous writers, using multiple sources. They help us to grasp how people decipher and create reality, and to be acquainted with "how what is said fits into a network that has its own history and conditions of existence". (Barrett 126)

They are worried about importance and setting just as substance and the acts of numerous creators, utilizing many, and changed sorts of sources. They help us to see how individuals decipher and make reality, and to know about "how what is said fits into an organization that has its own set of experiences and states of presence". (Barrett 126)

As such, discourse can be observed in the use of spoken, written and signed language (Foucault). Moreover, it is the sum total of ideas, concepts and categorizations that are produced, reproduced, performed, and transformed in a particular set of discursive practices. The context, environment and the conditions within which a defined knowledge is produced, practiced and made accessible to others is very crucial from the viewpoint of discourse. Discourse is not simply the content of what is said or shown; it also includes the conceptual, social, and historical conditions behind the statement/s made. Discourse comprises institutions, rules, values, desires, concepts and everything that could have played a part in the construction of knowledge. Beaugrande mentions seven criteria to ascertain as to whether a text could be viewed as discourse, or not:

A Theoretical Perspective Of Discourse Analysis: Strengths And Shortcomings

There are seven criteria, which have to be fulfilled to qualify either a written or a spoken text as a discourse. Cohesion means grammatical relationship between parts of sentence essential for its interpretation. Coherence is the order of statements that relates one concept with another to make its sense. Intentionality is the message that has to be conveyed deliberately and consciously to its readers. Acceptability indicates that the communicative product needs to be satisfactory in the manner that the audience approves it. Informativeness means that some new information has to be included in the discourse. Then comes the situationality that means the circumstances in which the remark is made are important. Intertextuality is the reference to the world outside the text or the interpreter's schemata" [*italics mine*]. (Beaugrande 49)

In the light of the above criteria, it can be averred that literature along with all cultural practices comprising films, art forms, fashion, etc. can be studied as discourse as each has language of its own. Since literature is written in language and considered a privileged vehicle of the narrative, the relationship between language and literature can be interpreted in multiple ways. It is fallacious to think that literature uses language only as an instrument of expression and then abandons it. On the contrary, as Barthes observes: "Language never ceases to accompany discourse, holding up to it the mirror of its own structure" (Barthes 11). Thus, fictional (or non-pragmatic) language can easily be brought under the rubric of discourse analysis.

Michel Foucault was relentless and non-compromising in exposing by way of logical analysis the underlying and complex structures of knowledge that were extremely crucial for discursive enquiry of the object by way of constructing knowledge about it and its eventual use/ distribution. Foucault was of the view that knowledge is "constructed, organized, shared and used through particular forms of speech, writing and language—or what is called discourse" (Nayar 35). In this sense, discourse implies varied contexts viz., speech (interaction in a community), representation (literary or any other), knowledge (of diverse kinds representing various disciplines/contexts) and of course understanding (the mode / manner by which knowledge is produced, distributed and redistributed).

In addition to the structures of knowledge, Foucault remained relentlessly engaged with decoding the baffling structures of power that enabled the authorities to dictate their terms in particular ways. Foucault viewed these dictates and systems of monitoring what was right and what was wrong as discourse signifying a "terrain of thought, a system Of knowledge, a particular kind of language that allowed some things to be said and disallowed some others" (Nayar 35), For instance, the priest uses discourse of religion, the physician using discourse of sickness and the psychiatrist using discourse of rationality. For Foucault, such discourses were sites of contestation and scientific enquiry to demonstrate as to how these conditioned peoples' habitual and behavioural reflexes alongside profoundly impacting on their thinking. Power being the epicentre in human life, everything else that comprises being human revolves around it and it is only through discourse (which is the site as well as a strategy) that its structurally layered operation can be decoded.

Discourse is not a monolithic construct; it is rather diversified and divergent. Since it is use of language associated with a particular institution, cultural identity, profession, practice or discipline, each discourse is one of several discourses. For instance, the discourse of the colonizer is different from the discourse of the colonized. Whatever be the nature of discourse (general/particular), it is always

inscribed within relations of power, within the structures and structures of institutions. To sum up, Foucauldian postulation demonstrates that discourse has an object, a language and a powerful figure who represents authority and who employs language to describe / classify the object, and a “corrective mechanism” (Nayar 6) drawing upon the description / classification.

Now that the politics of discourse is sufficiently evident, as discourses by and large about wield power of one sort or the other over the marginalized and disempowered. As a case in point, Edward Said in *Orientalism* underscores two aspects of discourse: a) that the culture of empire in its diverse areas was an integral part of establishing and maintaining colonial control and b) that what creates discourse is set of rules which determines who can speak and what statement will be regarded as valid and what will seem implausible.

As such the subject itself determines what can be said about it. Another important point about discourse is that no arena of knowledge and enquiry, be that historical, literary, scientific or socio-cultural, is “neutral.” It is simply because it is affected, controlled and shaped by the institutions that support it. Colonial discourse enquires into the manner how colonized people were constructed and represented and also as to how their voices were silenced within colonial writing having scant regard for the problems and reality of the natives. In the like fashion, one may deal with the discourses of patriarchy through the representations of the pure/ seductive/ hysterical/ vulnerable woman have been institutionalized in the “uneven structures of marriage, education, religion, the law, history, literature, science and politics” (Nayar36).

Foucault’s discursive approach to unravel the structures of power in all their complexities were followed by Barthes’s divergent views on the text, which for him was a “series of linguistic processes” decoded by the reader. Moreover, it is a site characterized by plurality and remains ever open to other texts in an endless series of “intertextual operations.” Since he pronounced the author dead, the understanding/ interpretations of text remained in the readerly domain getting subjected to an endless meaning-making activity. Derrida also underscored the importance of ‘mobility’ (that too of infinite sort) in the process of signification marked by an infinite “free play” of signifiers. Both, Barthes and Derrida suggested that no text can yield any definitive meaning and that language always operates on a slippery terrain and signifiers being arbitrary, there is hardly any possibility of the final meaning-interpretation. Derridian deconstruction also builds on the ‘unfinalizable’ (and therefore, always ‘deferring’) process of interpretation of meaning/ multiplex sets of meanings as there is the possibility of a different interpretation always. He shows how text can subvert its stated aims/ goals thereby relying on contradictions. Derrida’s emphasis remained on demonstrating how meanings can never have a sense of finality on account of ambivalences inherent therein.

Following the implications of the discourse theories, literary critics have started looking at literature as a form of discourse with its own domain. Roger Webster (*Studying Literary Theory*), for example, shows how literature can be studied afresh in the light of different discourse theories: “By studying a text primarily in terms of its discursive organization instead of the traditional categories such as character, plot and morality, different readings and meanings become available; a new set of textual relations arises in which the historical and ideological operations which take place can be more readily understood. Literary texts can be seen not only as constructions but as important sites of historical debate in which the conflicts and tensions of an age are worked through, either to harmonize and

A Theoretical Perspective Of Discourse Analysis: Strengths And Shortcomings

disguise oppositional tendencies, or in an attempt to alter the established and dominant power structures (Webster 68).

Analysts of discourse must keep several other things in mind. What Deborah Schiffrin says about the principles of spoken aspects of discourse (in her *Approaches to Discourse*) can be fruitfully applied to the analysis of both spoken and written forms. We briefly summarize here the six principles of discourse analysis listed by her :

1. “Analysis of discourse is empirical.” Analysts must be able to explain their data sequentially and distributionally.

“Discourse is not just a sequence of linguistic units.” To understand its coherence requires paying attention to more than form and meaning.

“Linguistic forms and meanings work together with social and cultural meanings.”

2. “The structures, meanings, and actions of everyday spoken discourse are interactively achieved.”

3. “Utterances are produced and interpreted in the local contexts of other utterances.

4. “How something is said, meant, and done. . . is guided by relationships” among (a) speaker’s intentions; (b) strategies for “making intentions recognizable”; (c) meanings and functions of linguistic forms in context; (d) “sequential context of other utterances; (e) kind of discourse (narrative, expository, etc.); (f) “the social context”; and (g) “cultural framework of beliefs and actions”. (Schiffrin 416)

In order to understand and analyse discourse, we must take into account the relationship between structure and function, text and context, and the language of the discourse and the world in which it is placed. All forms of well-written discourse in all disciplines have nearly the same characteristic features, but in literature they constitute the very warp and woof. These are devices like foregrounding, cohesion, and deviation, to mention only three.

By cohesion, we mean the grammatical and lexical relationships between the different elements of a text or discourse. Foregrounding means the use of the linguistic devices in such a way that their use begins to draw attention to itself. Deviation is literally a change away from the expected norms. In art, it is a deliberate attempt to move away from the accepted norms and conventions because compliance with an aesthetic norm is no guarantee of aesthetic value. A prevailing aesthetic norm can be partly or even completely violated in order to create some specific effects. The result is not something inartistic but a revaluation of the existing norms and the creation of a new one. In poetry, it becomes a virtue like foregrounding if it contributes to the aesthetic effect. In the remaining pages of this paper I will focus on deviation and demonstrate how it works in discourse to create specific effects.

To conclude, we can say that one can aver that discourse is diverse in form as well as operation. The Foucauldian implication of the term equates it with the construction as well as distribution of knowledge thereby systematically analysing the operation of power. Barthes and Derrida shifted the focus to the reading of texts thereby opening vast and infinite arena of interpretations. Derridian deconstructionist mode of textual analysis demonstrated how language “bears within itself the necessity of its own critique” (Lodge and Wood 84). Foucault too, like other poststructuralists, views

discourse as “central human activity” but not as a universal “general text” or a vast sea of signification: “He is interested in the historical dimension of discursive change—what is possible to say will change from one era to another” (Selden et al 188). Derrida described discourse as “a System in which the central signified, the original or transcendental signified, is never absolutely present outside a system of differences. The absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the play of signification infinitely” (Lodge and Wood 91). As such, in both Foucauldian as well as Derridian senses, discourse operates within a system (be that knowledge system, political system or text/ s) to understand, analyse, expose and challenge it by strategically employing a particular kind of idiom/ language and simultaneously critiquing itself. At times, discourse may also seek transformation in social realms of reading/ meaning-making thereby enabling a reading practice, a political commitment and a mode of interpretation.

Works Cited:

1. Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin. *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies* [2nd ed.]. Routledge, 2007.
2. Barrett, Michele. *The Politics of Truth: From Marx to Foucault*. Stanford University Press, 1991.
3. Benveniste Emile, *Problems in General Linguistics* (Miami Linguistic, No. 8). University of Miami Press, 1973.
4. Cuddon, J. A. *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* [3rd ed.]. Penguin Books, 1992.
5. De Beaugrande, R. A. and Dressler, W. U. *Introduction to Text Linguistics*, Longman, 1981.
6. Derrida, Jacques, *Writing and Difference*, University of Chicago Press, 1978.
7. Eagleton, Terry. *Literary Theory: An Introduction* [2nd ed.]. Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 2003.
8. Edgar, Andrew, Peter Sedgwick. ed., *Cultural Theory: The Key Concepts* [2nd ed.]. Routledge, 2007.
9. Foucault, Michel. *Power/Knowledge*. Pantheon, 1981.
10. Johnson, Justin. “What is discourse?” <https://www.stolaf.edu/depts/cis/wp/johnsoja/works/index.html>. Accessed 22 April 2008.
11. McCarthy, Michael. *Discourse Analysis for Language Teachers* (Cambridge Language Teaching Library). Cambridge University Press, 1991.
12. Nayar, Pramod K. *The Postcolonial Studies Dictionary*. Wiley Blackwell, 2015.
13. Nayar, Pramod K. *Postcolonial Literature: An Introduction*. Pearson, 2008.
14. Nayar, Pramod K. *Postcolonialism: A Guide for the Perplexed*. Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010.
15. Renkema, J. *Introduction to Discourse Studies*. John Benjamins Publishing, 2004.
16. Said, Edward. *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*. Penguin, 1991.
17. Saussure, Ferdinand. *Course in General Linguistics*. Trans. Wade Baskin. New York: McGraw Hill, 1959.
18. Schiffrin, Deborah. *Approaches to Discourse: Language as Social Interaction*. Wiley-Blackwell, 1994.
19. Selden, Raman , Peter Widdowson and Peter Brooker. *A Reader’s Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*. Taylor & Francis, 2016.

A Theoretical Perspective Of Discourse Analysis: Strengths And Shortcomings

20. Tannen, Deborah. *Talking Voices: Repetition, Dialogue, and Imagery in Conversational Discourse*. Cambridge University Press ,2007.
21. Waugh, Patricia. ed., *Literary Theory and Criticism*. Oxford University Press, 2006.
22. Webster, Roger. *Studying Literary Theory: An Introduction*. Bloomsbury, 2016.
23. Wolfreys, Julian, Ruth Robbins and Kenneth Womack. *Key Concepts in Literary Theory* [2nd ed.]. Edinburgh University Press,2006.
24. Wood, Nigel , David Lodge. *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*. Routledge, 2014.
25. “Johnson defines discourse as an institutionalized way” Course Hero [.https://www.coursehero.com/file/p6odn2n/Johnson-defines-discourse-as-an-institutionalized-way-of-speaking-that/](https://www.coursehero.com/file/p6odn2n/Johnson-defines-discourse-as-an-institutionalized-way-of-speaking-that/). Accessed 7April 2020.