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Introductory Chapter: Discourse and Discourse Analysis. A Retrospective Approach

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1. Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to highlight the theoretical frame of reference for the works included in this book. We intend to delimit the field of study for discourse analysis by highlighting the main theories and concepts that ensure its specificity. Interdisciplinary, which is the distinctive feature of discourse analysis, marks the evolution of research in this field that we are trying to capture in our proposed retrospective approach.

The review of research that configures the domain of discourse analysis illustrates the latter relevance in deciphering the meaning of communication as an important qualitative research method in the field of communication sciences. This is, in fact, the orientation we propose to the *Discourse Analysis* book, since the studies that it contains reflect the usefulness of discourse analysis in determining the meaning in real-life communication situations.

2. Key premises

Discourse analysis has emerged as a field of discourse research, responding to the interdisciplinary requirement claimed by the complexity of the subject matter. According to D. Rovența-Frumușani [1], the discourse analysis field is defined by mobility and diversity, ‘a crucible in which recent tendencies converge (the philosophy of language, the theory of enunciation, symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology, etc.) and century-old practices (rhetorical or philological)’—or socio-normative ones, thinking about the various concepts of the interactive ritual. Thus, discourse analysis provides a heterogeneous epistemological framework for the investigation of the discourse as a signifying system.

In these terms, discourse analysis becomes a viable qualitative method in communication research. Following a period when structuralist theories dominated the search for the meaning of communication, discourse analysis emerged as an interdisciplinary space in which the epistemological paradigms of pragmatics (the new rhetoric, the theory of enunciation, the theory of speech acts) and of sociology (ethnomethodology, ethnography of communication, analysis of conversation, sociolinguistics) cohabit. In her book, *Approaches to Discourse* [2], Deborah Schiffrin presents six approaches that she considers to be dominant in discourse analysis in order to study ‘the use of language for social, expressive and referential purposes’: the theory of speech acts, pragmatics, ethnomethodology, interactional sociolinguistics, ethnography of communication and variational sociolinguistics.

The trans- and interdisciplinary character of the field is thus updated in theories and concepts that intend to articulate the language with social, psychological and cultural factors in order to produce and decipher its meaning. Despite its heterogeneity, from this perspective, the discourse analysis finds its unity and consistency in the existence of certain common points of the disciplines that contribute to its constitution, namely:

- Conceptualization of the discourse as a collective construction
- Intervention of social and cultural norms, which determines roles and relationships of the participants, as well as the content of the messages
- Social and interactive character of language
- Dynamics of the enunciation

Linguistic research on discourse channelizes interest towards detecting regularities through which coherence of phrases is achieved therein. Observations about the transphrastic connection at the level of discourse have existed since antiquity. Creating an oration implied the division of the orator's task into five stages: *inventio* (searching for ideas and arguments), *dispositio* (organisation of arguments), *elocutio* (application of writing/stylistic techniques), *actio* (application of oral expression techniques) and *memoria* (application of techniques of recalling the arguments of the oration, intervening either in free or improvised speech) [3]. Thus, classical rhetoric pointed out both the way of linking the demonstrative moments of the speech, hence the semantic connection, as well as the way of linking the linguistic elements, by *elocutio*, i.e. the explicit interphrastic connection.

The study of the transphrastic connection as a feature of the discourse is addressed in modern linguistics by introducing the conceptual couples' *theme* and *rheme/topic* and *comment* (in the American discourse analysis) where the significance attributed to the *theme* reflects the transgression of the sentence and the reference to earlier elements expressed in the discourse. In this respect, an important role is played by the representatives of the Prague school who asserted the unity of the discourse as communicative act, where the information input and, consequently, the progression of the text are mirrored by the relationship between *theme* and *rheme* [4, 5].

Zelig Harris's article *Discourse Analysis* (1952), which establishes the term *discourse analysis* to refer to research on the discourse, addresses the question of discursive contiguity on a formal plane, highlighting two issues relevant to what will later become discourse analysis. The first refers to overcoming the perspective limited to the study of the sentence, and the second concerns the correlation between culture (understood as nonlinguistic behaviour) and language/linguistic behaviour. For Harris, the connection between sentences is the result of the situation in which they have been articulated, which would lead to the conclusion that similar situations produce similarities of discourses. Harris' theory has been compromised, in the opinion of Segre, by ignoring the signified and the intention of the speaker, a fact that generates the acknowledgement of the necessity that, in the analysis, one should relate to the semantic aspects of the discourse [4].

Following the issue of discoursiveness, we consider it important to refer to the conceptual distinction between competence and performance in Noam Chomsky's generative grammar, developed in the second half of the 1950s.

Chomsky's theory of linguistics opposes the notions of competence and performance, defining *linguistic competence* as a set of knowledge/information about the

language available to any ideal speaker-listener, while *linguistic performance* involves the different ways in which this knowledge/information is used in the activity of producing statements, that is, in communication [6]. This conceptualization highlights the dissociation of grammar knowledge (rules, syntactic structures) from a set of other knowledge and skills related to the use of language.

The issue of competence-performance opposition, according to Latraverse [7], is relative to the neglect of aspects of speech activity that are not regulated by grammar competence and neither do they reveal any performance. The nature of communication, assuming not only the utterance of words or sentences but also mimicry, gesticulation, etc., implies the observation that beyond the verbal message one can identify an aspect whose role is not limited to illustrating the fact that the statement was produced by someone who speaks a language in a context, but that it works in order to make sense. This aspect, which falls under both competence and performance, is rendered with the help of discoursiveness.

Taking the intermediate position between competence and performance, the discourse has two dimensions: a contextual one (it cannot be dissociated from the context) and another dimension, the practice of language. Through the practical dimension of language, the discourse involves acts and interactions in which language plays the role of instrument or means of the communicative action. From this perspective, redefining competence and performance, one may say that the former relates to the rules that mechanically fix the structural description of the sentences, and the latter refers to norms, conventions and even rules that specify how contextual factors interact with grammatical structures to determine the meaning of the statement. Such an approach allows the *installation* of the interpretative approach proper to discourse analysis.

In response to Chomsky's theory, Dell Hymes, the founder of ethnographic trend in communication research, introduces the notion of *communicative competence*, meaning a feature of the individual, constituting an ensemble of cultural and interactive knowledge, a hyper-competence resulting from the completion of the linguistic knowledge obtained from grammars and dictionaries, with a series of extralinguistic knowledge.

The impossibility of addressing the discourse outside of the situation in which it is issued implies the disclosure of the pragmatic aspect of communication and opens the way of establishing a pragmatic perspective on the one hand and an anthropo-sociological perspective on the other. Pragmatics, attempting, in Ch. Morris' conception, 'to develop some appropriate terms for studying the relationship of signs with those who make use of them, and for systematically ordering the results of this study' [4] is considered a framework capable of justifying and clarifying the discursive elements that cannot be elucidated or exhausted by linguistic analysis. On the other hand, the anthropo-sociological perspective can constitute the complementary paradigm necessary to reach the semantic plurality of discourse, by taking into account the interactive and socio-normative contexts.

3. The evolution of research on the discourse

The first stage in the study of discourse, marked by the indissoluble relationship between the signified and the signifier, according to which the perception of the signified is conditioned by the one of the signifier, covers its microstructural level (phrastic and transphrastic). It is brought forward by modern theories aimed at revealing connections at macrostructural level that are necessary to understand discourse as a whole, that is, as a set of discursive units.

Structuralist theories, claiming to relate exclusively to the linguistic system, are clearly unsatisfactory, as well as the perspective of interaction that ignores the semiotic and symbolic plane. These 'disadvantages' lead to the formation of a new interdisciplinary field, based on concepts such as enunciation, interaction, transaction and performance, in which an investigative apparatus is formed, which establishes certain parameters to determine the meaning: intent, act, context and socio-interactive norms. The close connection between language act and social act is underlined by the notion according to which 'Discourse analysis should not only explain why certain statements and not others have been preferred, but also reflect how these statements have mobilised forces and have influenced social networks' [8]. The refusal of discourse analysis, in general, to conceptualise language through its representation function and to promote a communicative action designation for it causes a considerable change in the perspective that establishes the meaning of communication.

Research in the field has been going on to various directions for more than 30 years. Many of the research perspectives that form the field of discourse analysis are grouped in two directions, the Anglo-American one and the French one. Baylon [9] makes a comparative synthesis of research on the discourse in the two directions, of which we mention a few general aspects.

First of all, four fundamental paradigms are detected in discourse analysis that can be traced on both axes on which discourse research has evolved:

- Structural-functional
- Social/sociolinguistic
- Pragmatic
- Critical

The Anglo-American approach focuses almost exclusively on the internal properties of the discourse, namely, consistency, cohesion and pertinence, refusing the wider perspective situated beyond interpersonal connections and the reference to social context. The trends that marked the Anglo-American direction are anthropology and sociology, while the French direction was influenced by psychoanalysis, Marxism and linguistics.

In the Anglo-American discourse research, one can find a direction in which a great part of the theories was written, namely, the study of the structures of the discourse and of the functions they perform in social and cultural contexts. Since the 1970s, with the advent of Dell Hymes's ethnography of communication, which suggests that the interest of discourse analysis consists in the way how language works in different communication events to create and reflect elements of culture (an approach to communication across the cultural factor).

Then, there is sociolinguistics, oriented to the description of language used inside small social groups, to the study of conversation, argumentation and of other conventional interactions [10, 11]. The gender analysis [12] focuses on describing the structure of the text in context in the discourses of certain communities, on how the text reflects the social aspect of the domain, no matter if it belongs to natural, social or human sciences. Halliday focuses on the structural analysis of the text, while representatives of critical discourse analysis (van Dijk) appeal to various social theories to analyse the complex relationship between language and ideology in various contexts.

Potter highlights three significant aspects regarding the preoccupations of Anglo-American discourse analysis [13]:

- The way in which some conceptions on the world, society, events and inner universes of the individuals involved in the social practices are produced through the discourse
- The manners in which participants develop and undermine their constructions in verbal exchanges
- The way in which a text is a version that presents an objective reality and develops, in terms of coherence, as a stand-alone reality

The French orientation privileges language study in the social context, focusing on revealing interdisciplinary, intertextual or sequential relationships. Based on Bahtin's writings, strongly impregnated by Marxist ideology, the French direction highlights the communicative function of language, which is regarded as social action. Starting from the premise of the social and interactive dimension of language, a linguistic trend is developed that some theoreticians consider socially relevant and realistic. In this context, the discourse acquired a strong social determinant. Thus, in the view of D. Maingueneau, the discourse analysis sums up approaches to discourse, bringing the subjects' activity, the enunciation dynamics and the relation to the social context to the foreground [8].

The methodology of discourse analysis in French research relates to language on the one hand and to historical, sociological, psychoanalytic, philosophical and pragmatic considerations on the other, due to the correlation of the statement with its production conditions. From this perspective, the analysis of the discourse is not about *what* the text says, but about *how* it says it, along two indissociable orientations, namely, the analysis of the actual discourse (assuming the study of the statements made in the corpus) and the theory of discourse (aiming at establishing rules that organise potential sequences of sentences).

In the view of M. Pêcheux, the discourse analysis offers the opportunity to study the immediate communicative situations through the appeal to the statement-enunciation relationship and to the pertinence of the discourse situations, as well as to the possibility to study the sociocultural situations within the pragmatic framework by approaching them with linguistic criteria: 'the language [...] establishes the possibility of discursive processes, which may be set in specific production conditions determined historically by the ideological orientation of social formations' [14].

4. The new media and the new discourse

The performance of verbal exchanges in modern society reveals a context that undoubtedly bears the imprint of new means of communication, whose justification is to ensure the adaptation and integration of the individual in society, by mediating interindividual relations [15].

Through the intrusion of the new forms of media, current communication claims to provide a social binder, partly through the frequency of interpellation and the speed of exchange, partly due to the ability of the environment to privilege the primary dimension of communication. The presence of sound and image, in combination or not with the text, has become a constant of everyday verbal exchanges. The peculiarities of the environment lead to the proliferation of the forms of

communication, depending on the means of representing the meanings and their various possibilities of combining. Consequently, the production and deciphering of the meaning of communication requires a heterogeneous set of knowledge, likely to capture its complexity.

The reality of current verbal exchanges thus reflects the coexistence of the new with the old, in the sense of manifesting two parallel systems of communication—the old resources and the new technologies [16]. The coexistence of the old with the new in modern communication is marked by the remodelling of some of the traditional resources with the help of the new technologies (e.g. the principles of text organisation). According to this approach, the reconsideration of the discourse and of its means of investigation is a matter of exigency.

In our recent studies on digital discourse, we have proposed a method of research that involves the imbrication of certain elements of discourse analysis with some elements of image production and analysis as well as with elements related to the electronic environment. With regard to the latter, we need to specify that they can be converted into communication evaluation units, either by equating them with discourse analysis elements (e.g. the number of posts of a transmitter signifies an increase in the act of enunciation by that transmitter) or by semantic acquisition. Thus, the networks, the networking, the type of social channel and the way people communicate become indices of the transmitter's intention of positioning in relation to her/his receiver.

5. Research on the virtual/digital discourse

The interest in the virtual discourse began to manifest in the 1980s, when some linguists signalled the effect of electronic communication on language [17]. Thus, the study of virtual discourse focuses on language and language usage in the electronic environment, involving the application of methods of discourse analysis to interpret it.

In the first instance, the preoccupations for virtual discourse turned to a certain discursive genre, materialising in descriptions of virtual communication systems (the IBM synchronous message system or the Swedish COM conference system). Since the 1990s, an exploration has been made of this type of discourse.

The first wave of studies, focusing either on empirical descriptions of language in the virtual environment or on the variety of discourse in this environment, appears as a reaction to the existing perception of the virtual discourse. It is known that, in general, certain properties have been routinely attributed to virtual communication such as anonymity, impersonalism, egalitarianism, fragmentation or orality, generated by the nature of the channel. These studies have contributed to the development of the research axis by individualising this type of discourse and plotting its boundaries as a discursive genre.

Subsequently, the studies on the discourse revealed the indisputable influence that situational and technical factors exert on communication, generating its variety and complexity. The importance of environmental characteristics for understanding the nature of language in the digital environment has been demonstrated, while the effects of the electronic environment on the users' linguistic behaviour have been pointed out. Moreover, these particularities create a unique, special environment that, far from the competitive influence of other communication channels or the physical context, allows the study of verbal interaction and of the relationship between discourse and social practice.

The idea is that the virtual environment considerably marks the communication process in all its aspects, especially the way in which it unfolds. Both changes in the

communication practices regarding the type of interaction and writing, the content of communication and the public exposure (by adopting a virtual identity) are mentioned as well as the emergence and development of certain social communication channels (blog, forums, social networks) [18].

In terms of organisational interactions in the virtual environment, P. Levy emphasises the role played by the computer and the virtual networks in creating the interactive character of communication: 'The cyber-space provides cooperative construction tools for a common context for multiple, geographically scattered groups. The communication highlights its entire pragmatic dimension. It is no longer a diffusion or a transport of the message, but an interaction within a situation that everybody seeks to alter or stabilize, a negotiation of meanings, a process of mutual recognition and a contribution of individuals/groups in the communication process' [19].

Herring identifies two features of the virtual environment as sources of barriers in organising the interaction [17]:

1. Interruption/fragmentation of the chaining of replies caused by the fact that the messages are posted in the order they are received by the system, without taking into account the message with which a reply is related.
2. Absence of simultaneous feedback due to reduced audiovisual indices.

Verbal exchanges in the electronic environment are characterised by more rapidity than those specific to the written form of communication (e.g. letters, published essays, which require the other's response). On the other hand, compared to oral verbal exchanges, in the electronic environment, the verbal exchanges take place at a significantly slower pace, even in situations when the forms of electronic communication unfold in real time.

The discourse in the virtual environment allows the simultaneous participation of several interlocutors, which is difficult if not impossible in other environments due to cognitive limits on the ability of participants to perform more than one exchange at a particular moment [17].

Dissemination of electronic messages implies a transfer of information that does not occur in a context of coexistence: the transmitter and the receiver are not in the same physical context; the transmitter addresses a receiver he or she does not see and sometimes does not even know. Nevertheless, apparently, this fact leaves the impression of direct interaction, even 'private', in the opinion of King [20].

All these particularities of the discourse, which derive from the specificity of the environment in which it takes place, create the feeling of a distinct experience to the protagonists in relation to what the written or oral communication provides. Face-to-face interaction has a *rich* informational transfer environment updated in the many channels that go into operation: visual, auditory, gustatory, tactile, etc. In contrast, virtual communication only has a visual and sometimes auditory channel for transmitting information. The finding led to the conclusion that the electronic environment is an inappropriate one for the development of social relations. Despite the lack of specific direct communication indices, this claim was denied by the many expressive possibilities used by participants.

The electronic environment allows interlocutors to act/interact concomitantly on multiple communication channels (e.g. they listen to music while chatting). This capacity offered by new communication technologies is called *polyfocality* [21].

In contrast, the virtual environment is permissive from this point of view, the phenomenon being called *mutual monitoring possibilities*: writing or engaging in a

discussion in the real world does not impede a chat conversation at all, for example. Moreover, the environment gives users the opportunity to manifest themselves in the *primary involvement* without the interlocutor/interlocutors might feel offended. It is a shift in attention, in focus, which ultimately works as a limit imposed by the environment.

Therefore, communication in the virtual environment appears both permissive and coercive: on the one hand, it expands the possibilities of the interlocutors, on the other it restricts. In this sense, attention is more a social issue than an individual one, always being manifested in relation to someone (paying attention to *someone*/attracting *someone's* attention). Debray [22] uses the concept of *mediology* by attributing it a meaning that embraces both the one of 'communication media' and a significance related to their function.

Refraining from focusing on the means in a strict sense and rather focusing on their functional valences of the communication ('to be in between', to bind, to organise), this design implies understanding the concept of means in the present-day communication in a broader sense, given by the indissociable cohabitation of the technology and the social.

Encompassing the meaning of the interactional field, the context in virtual communication implies the social-individual game (which allows us to live together separately). According to Bougnox [15], technical equipment acquire their profound significance, completed by utilisation: 'No technique in itself carries its full meaning, as no statement is carrying meaning outside its enunciation'.

6. Conclusion

The analysis of the discourse seeks to understand the interactions in society, by trying to identify and analyse the rules used by individuals, the relationship between the linguistic regularities, on the one hand, meanings and finality, on the other hand that are negotiated through the discourse. In this respect, Maingueneau points out that the object of discourse analysis is neither the textual organisation in itself nor the communication situation, but the 'enunciative device that correlates a textual organization and a determined social place' [23].

In the opinion of van Dijk, 'discourse analysis gives us powerful and yet subtle instruments of highlighting the everyday manifestations of social problems in communication and interaction' [24]. Roventă-Frumușani [1] highlights the legitimacy of research that is found both at the level of content interpretation—through the existence of units that can only be dealt with using the discourse framework and the interpretation of the discourse that exceeds the sum of the meanings of the sentences—and at the level of the text-context relationship, using the ability to elucidate the utilization of language by individuals in real situations.

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