

Understanding Discourse in Terms of Its Characteristics

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Abstract: ‘Discourse’ can also be understood via its characteristics. Instead of tracing its historical journey, one can also make an effort to go through its important traits to have a general understanding of the concept. For this purpose, following traits have been discussed in this article: (a) Most of the people experience life through the framework of one or the other discourse. It’s very difficult if not impossible to come out of the conundrum of varied discourses. (b) Discourse is a not a one way traffic, that is, every stakeholder involved in it can exert her influence or mark her presence. (c) Discourse is a structured response to a particular event. It is enforced through linguistic as well as non-linguistic means like rituals, customary practices, institutional practices, etc. (d) Discourse can also be defined as a linguistic communication which is socially bound. It means that nature of a discourse depends upon the social and institutional context in which it is being operated. (e) Discourse is normalized or naturalized through the process of ‘ritualization’. Ritualization empowers discursive subjects with specific discursive roles while, at the same time, disempowers others reducing them to the capacity of discursive objects only. (f) In addition to these characteristics, some selective key insights given by Michel Foucault have also been debated.

Key Words: Discourse, Characteristics, Language, Society, Ritualization, Michel Foucault

The concept of Discourse has been analyzed a lot by eminent scholars like Diane Macdonell (1986), Norman Fairclough (1992, 1995), Ruth Wodak (1996), Sara Mills (1997), James Paul Gee (2001), and David Howarth (2002) from various perspectives like language, practices, theories, etc. Fairclough and Gee have also proposed some methods of analyzing a discourse like critical discourse analysis, linguistic analysis, etc. Overall, most of these scholars have tried to give a theoretical framework to the concept of discourse. They have traced its historical development from Saussure to the present times, mainly up to Michel Foucault. The researcher’s assumption in this paper is that one can also understand the idea of discourse by taking another route that is, elaborating its main characteristics only without confining them to a particular writer or her theoretical orientation. These characteristics are almost common and have been described by various scholars in one way or the other. Of course, it’s not possible to take on all the possible common characteristics in this article; an effort has been done to present a comprehensive view of the important ones. As most of the characteristics described below can be extended to any type of discourse, so, one can reach upon the general understanding of the concept discourse without delving deep into any particular writer’s writings.

Now, the researcher would like to start this discussion with Michel Foucault's views on discourse. For Foucault, there is no inherent subjectivity which is outside the influence of this discursive world. He elaborated the concept of discourse formation as under:

We must not resolve discourse into a play of pre-existing significations; we must not imagine that the world turns towards us a legible face which we would have only to decipher; the world is not the accomplice of our knowledge; there is no prediscursive providence which disposes the world in our favour. We must conceive discourse as a violence which we do to things, or in any case as a practice which we impose on them; and it is in this practice that the events of discourse find the principle of their regularity. ("The Order of Discourse" 67)

To him, the world is a messy affair and there are no preordained structures through which one can apprehend one's reality. Human beings impose their own understanding on this mass of reality and try to make it meaningful in their own way. This is done through various practices which become a regular affair in one's life. Thus, discourse is constructed and practiced in human life. For example, most of the societies are divided on the line of race, caste, class, religion, region, language, gender, etc. Every person is treated or recognized within the framework of these categories or identities. The essential and foremost identity of a being is relegated to some discursive position. It is subdued by these man-made identities. Gee's point of view regarding 'discourses' is relevant here:

It is sometimes helpful to think about social and political issues as if it is not just us humans who are talking and interacting with each other, but rather, the Discourses we represent and enact, and for which we are "carriers". The Discourses we enact existed before each of us came on the scene and most of them will exist long after we have left the scene. Discourses, through our words and deeds, carry on conversations with each other through history, and, in doing so, form human history. (18)

Discourse is a particular way of dealing with the reality of the world, understanding society and its various phenomena, and creating meaning using different tools like language, gestures, rituals, customs, traditions, etc. Reality or the natural state of things remains as it is for every person but how one interprets that reality is a matter of investigation. As soon as an infant comes out of the womb of its mother, it starts making sense of the reality of the physical world. Without questions, so many answers are given to a child. Not only answers, but suggestions and directions also. From early childhood, a child is told what to do and what not to. No doubt, it tries to apprehend the reality in its own way, but at every step, it is guided by some elder. Thus, most of the understanding of the events or happenings is not her own but it is the experience of others. Rarely a child enjoys incidents in her own way. Often, she is not allowed to observe and interpret her surroundings with her own understanding. Already gained understanding of the affairs is imposed upon her. This process of imposition becomes more complicated with the passage of time. For example, in most of the societies, even adult boys and girls are not allowed to choose their life partners. It is considered unethical, immoral, and irresponsible. Last but not least, as people of Indian subcontinent are obsessed with caste, Western societies are suffering from the malaise of race. For some, language plays a vital role in their life, while, for others religion is the question of do and die. So, it has become very difficult, if not impossible, to

experience life without these patterns of thoughts. Everybody has to adopt one or the other ideology or the perspective in life which is the result of various permutations among knowledge, power, and truth. James Paul Gee elaborates this process very aptly:

When we speak or write we always take a particular perspective on what the “world” is like. This involves us in taking perspectives on what is “normal” and not; what is “acceptable” and not; what is “right” and not; what is “real” and not; what is the “way things are” and not; what is the “ways things ought to be” and not; what is “possible” and not; what “people like us” or “people like them” do and don’t do; and so on and so forth, again through a nearly endless list. (2)

Thereupon, it is evident from the above discussion that discourse is a structured response to a particular event. It functions at the level of language, social behavior, traditional customs, rituals, institutions, etc. Various symbols or signs and practices are used to enforce a particular discourse. Gee explains the concept of discourse in the following way:

‘Discourse’ ... that is, different ways in which we humans integrate language with non-language “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). (13)

Thus, discourses are created by using linguistic items with non-linguistic ways of dealing with this material world. Consequently, these discursive devices create particular understanding of the reality, particular identities, and typical version of truths. It is equally applicable to different types of discourses like religious discourse, academic discourse, media discourse, feminist discourse, etc. For example, in the context of religious discourse, various characters from Balmiki’s *Ramayana* and Vyas’ *Mahabharata* are deified. They are adored in daily utterances, religious songs, various customs, and rituals. Strange, superhuman, and exaggerated physical forms are given to them which are circulated into people through statues, posters, and many other modes of communication. Visual media makes these characters alive. Ultimately, all these characters are transformed into Gods and Goddesses. All this happens through various channels. Actually, people tend to believe in what is presented to them again and again in a meaningful way. With the passage of time, new discursive patterns and symbols are created and circulated among the masses to maintain the status quo. Trevor Purvis and Alan Hunt elucidate the concept of Discourse in a very lucid manner in the context of feminist discourse:

‘Discourse’ refers to the individual social networks of communication through the medium of language or non-verbal sign-systems. Its key characteristic is that of putting in place a system of linked signs. Whilst the more important examples are speech systems or written language (texts), discourse can be non-verbal; for example, practices in which males open doors for females, rise when females enter rooms, etc. are elements of a discourse whose organizing framework is a strict sexual division of labour, in which females are both secondary but valorized as in need of male care and protection. (485)

It is again clear that discourse manifests itself through linguistic as well as non-linguistic sign-systems. Major sources of discourse analysis may be conversations and written texts, but other practices or rituals are equally vital to understand the maneuverings of discourse. Non-verbal practices are always supplemented by verbal discourse. For example, in Indian context, most of the women are confined to home and child-care. They are seldom allowed to go out on their own. All the major decisions related to home and family are taken by males without any proper consultation with female members. Women have no significant rights and freedom in comparison to men. Even, in such scenario, males are often heard to valorize or empower the roles of the females in a humorous and mocking manner by saying, '*Tu to ghar ki rani h*' (You are the queen of home) or 'You are our Home Minister' or '*Ghar jate hi belan se dhulai honi hai*' ('As I reach home, I'll be beaten by the roller'), etc. So, such tropes help to sustain the discourse of patriarchy in a humble manner. Discourse tends to veil the reality and presents a different scene altogether. Thus, discursive mirage becomes the reality, and reality becomes a mirage. Trevor Purvis and Alan Hunt describe the nature of discourse as if it is a censor:

What the concept tries to capture is that people live and experience within discourse in the sense that discourses impose frameworks which limit what can be experienced or the meaning that experience can encompass, and thereby influence what can be said and done. Each discourse allows certain things to be said and impedes or prevents other things from being said. Discourses thus provide specific and distinguishable mediums through which communicative action takes place. (485)

As language gives form to ideas, it becomes the foremost site for analysis. In a way, language creates the meaning for speaker as well as listener, so, manipulation, contestation, and control of meaning starts with the language one uses.

Actually, construction of a particular discourse starts with the use of language. As is mentioned above, language is used according to the social context, so, discourse can also be defined as a linguistic communication which is socially bound. The same proposition has been given by Geoffrey Leech and Michael Short, "Discourse is linguistic communication seen as a transaction between speaker and hearer, as an interpersonal activity whose form is determined by its social purpose (qtd. in Mills 3)." Institutional and social nature of discourse is prominent at each level. It is created, controlled, and developed by those who use it for one or other reason. Discourse is always communicative from both sides. At what place and by whom it is practiced, determines the very nature of discourse. Diane Macdonell rightly observes:

Dialogue is the primary condition of discourse: all speech and writing is social . . .
. Discourses differ with the kinds of institutions and social practices in which they take shape, and with the positions of those who speak and those whom they address. The field of discourse is not homogeneous. (1)

Discourse cannot be applied in an isolated setting. There is always a doer and a receiver. Both are active in their own way. Then again, their arguments are shaped by the social position which is defining them. So, social context plays a vital role in shaping discourse as explained by Mills:

Thus, a discourse is not a disembodied collection of statements, but groupings of utterances or sentences, statements which are enacted within a social context,

which are determined by that social context and which contribute to the way that social context continues its existence. Institutions and social context therefore play an important determining role in the development, maintenance and circulation of discourses. (10)

In a way, with Saussure's efforts, social theory came out of its dualistic practices. Now, in addition to mind and body, there was talk of language and its related fields like linguistics, semantics, and semiotics also. This multifarious and more practical approach of analyzing social systems was termed as 'discourse theory'. Trevor Purvis and Alan Hunt describe the journey of 'discourse theory' as a way to go beyond the dual understanding of the world:

Discourse theory urges us to shake off the organization of the world into two great realms of the mental and the material. The concept facilitates the escape from the pervasive influence of the thought/being opposition in the grand trinity of oppositions that has formed the philosophical background for the project of the social sciences: nature/culture, individual/society and mind/body. One attractive way of effecting a breach with these pervasive dualities is to start with language as a defining character and condition of sociality. It provides an uncomplicated way to think of 'the social' as something distinct from the mere aggregate of individuals. (484)

Jacques Derrida also asserted that there is no set meaning of a text or it's not possible that there is only single particular structure in a text. A text is made up of multiple structures or meanings that depend on the context in which it is being analyzed. Consequently, he proposed that all concepts, structures, and texts have multiple meanings because of their own nature. David Howarth elucidates Derrida's arguments in the following manner:

To put it another way, it is not because concepts have multiple and contradictory meanings that they are undecidable; rather, it is the way these words are arranged structurally that makes their meaning ambiguous. Generalizing from this argument, Derrida argues that all structures or texts are in principle intrinsically plural and undecidable. (43)

In addition to institutional and social nature of discourse, ritualization forms the core non-verbal aspect of it. It normalizes the other linguistic mechanisms of discourse. Ritualization means only certain people are eligible or allowed to perform certain acts, to utter certain statements, to sanction something or not, etc. This process of ritualization also creates desired subjects. For example, in Indian context, only pundits can solemnize certain rituals like marriage, baptism, death ceremony, etc. No other person is permitted to perform these acts. Michel Foucault examines the process of ritualization in a discourse:

Ritual defines the qualification which must be possessed by individuals who speak (and who must occupy such-and-such a position and formulate such-and-such a type of statement, in the play of a dialogue, or interrogation or recitation); it defines the gestures, behavior, circumstances, and the whole set of signs which must accompany discourse; finally, it fixes the supposed or imposed efficacy of the words, their effect on those to whom they are addressed, and the limits of their constraining value. Religious, judicial, therapeutic, and in large measure also political discourses can scarcely be dissociated from this deployment of a ritual

which determines both the particular properties and the stipulated roles of the speaking subjects. (“The Order of Discourse” 62)

It is this ritualization in discourses that determines one’s language, gestures, postures, and role in a particular situation. In this way, a ritualized discourse hijacks the whole event. There is no scope for any other person or element to impress upon the event. Most of the control is exerted through this process. Interesting thing about the ritualization of discourse is the legality or legitimacy that it provides to certain persons only. Same acts or statements are of no value if performed by non-authorized fellows. This is the control of the circumstance that Foucault talked about in the contestation of knowledge, power, and truth. The same argument has been forwarded by the critic Sara Mills:

Discourse is bounded about by rituals which limit the number of people who can utter certain types of utterance: for example, in Britain, only a priest or registrar can legally marry a couple; only the monarch can open Parliament. If someone who is not sanctioned uttered the same words, the statement would not have an effect; thus, an actor who ‘marries’ someone on stage is not legally married to them. (63)

As is mentioned earlier, process of ritualization produces particular types of subjects and objects. It transforms one subject as powerful and others insignificant.

Foucault, in his unearthing activity, devised the particular fields of discursive statements. He encouraged studying diverse statements with their positive effects. It means that statements were to be analyzed in their historical context to understand their existential value. It also indicated towards the disconnection of the discourse or discursive structures from one period to the next. He developed the full meaning of discourse focusing upon its historical discontinuity. He proposed his outcome in this way:

So, we can now give a full meaning to the definition of Discourse that we suggested above. We shall call discourse a group of statements in so far as they belong to the same discursive formation; it does not form a rhetorical or formal unity, endlessly repeatable, whose appearance or use in history might be indicated (and, if necessary, explained); it is made up of a limited number of statements for which a group of conditions of existence can be defined. Discourse in this sense is not an ideal, timeless form that also possesses a history; the problem is not therefore to ask one-self how and why it was able to emerge and become embodied at this point in time; it is, from beginning to end, historical – a fragment of history, a unity and discontinuity in history itself, posing the problem of its own limits, its divisions, its transformations, the specific modes of its temporality rather than its sudden irruption in the midst of the complicities of time. (*The Archaeology of Knowledge* 131)

Thus, Foucault proposed some illuminating insights which further guided the course of research in social sciences. His ideas provide a larger framework to analyze any social structure.

Conclusion: This article has endeavoured to describe and analyze some of the main characteristics of the concept of Discourse and to create a general understanding of the same. Discourse is pervasive in day to day dealings of the life. It is very difficult to avoid the structures of one or the other discourse. A discourse works through linguistic and non-linguistic elements.

It can better be comprehended only in social and institutional settings. In Foucault's views, it can be understood, among other, through the processes of ritualization and historical discontinuity.

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