



Discourse Analysis and Communication between Cultures

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ABSTRACT

Discourse analysis is a rapidly growing and evolving field. Current research in this field now flows from numerous academic disciplines that are very different from one another. Included, of course, are the disciplines in which models for understanding and methods for analyzing discourse first developed, such as linguistics, anthropology, and philosophy. But also included are disciplines that have applied – and thus often extended – such models and methods to problems within their own academic domains, such as communication, cognitive psychology, social psychology, and artificial intelligence. Given this disciplinary diversity, it is no surprise that the terms “discourse” and “discourse analysis” have different meanings to scholars in different fields. For many, particularly linguists, “discourse” has generally been defined as anything “beyond the sentence.” For others (for example Fasold 1990: 65), the study of discourse is the study of language use. These definitions have in common a focus on specific instances or spates of language. But critical theorists and those influenced by them can speak, for example, of “discourse of power” and “discourses of racism,” where the term “discourses” not only becomes a count noun, but further refers to a broad conglomeration of linguistic and nonlinguistic social practices and ideological assumptions that together construct power or racism. The main objective of this paper is first to give a brief historical account of several of the main lines of development of these different perspectives. Then we will look more closely at the presuppositions about the nature of discursive and communicative research which underlie these different approaches. Finally we will discuss some of the problematical areas which remain in the intersection of discourse analysis and intercultural communication.

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Introduction

In current usage, the term “discourse analysis” is polysemy. On the one hand, it refers to the close linguistic study, from different perspectives, of texts in use. On the other hand, discourse refers to socially shared habits of thought, perception, and behavior reflected in numerous texts belonging to different genres. In the first sense, discourse analysis grows out of a heterogeneous group of disciplines including linguistic analysis, French structuralism, the ethnography of communication, Hallidayan functional linguistics, linguistic philosophy, pragmatics, and variation analysis (McCarthy 1991; Schiffrin 1994), all of which focus on the analysis and interpretation of texts in use. In the second sense, discourse analysis grows out of critical, sociocultural, sociological, or historical analysis. To distinguish this sense from the narrower use of “discourse,” writers speak of Discourses, orders of discourse, or discursive formations (Foucault 1973a, 1973b, 1976, 1977a, 1977b; Fairclough 1989, 1992, 1995a, 1995b; Gee 1986, 1989, 1996, 1999; Wodak 1996). For example, Gee defines Discourses as “ways of being in the world, or forms of life which integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, and social identities, as well as gestures, glances, body positions, and clothes” (Gee 1996: 127). Foucault (1976) uses “discursive formation” to refer to the statements characteristic of clinical medicine, grammar, or economics of a particular time and place. In this line of development the primary focus is on society and social practice, with an attenuated or even absent interest in texts or discourse in the narrower linguistic sense.

This historical polysemy merged in the decade of the 1990s. In most analysis of discourse as text, the analysis seeks to position itself as well as the discourse being studied within a broader sociocultural or historical context. At the same time, those broader studies of social practice are coming to ground themselves in the close analysis of concrete texts. Perhaps the central tenet of this line of thought is that social practice and discourse are mutually constitutive phenomena (Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999). That is, social practices are understood as being constituted in and through discursive social interaction while at the same time those social interactions are taken as instantiations of pre-existing social practices.

“Intercultural communication” and “cross-cultural communication” are problematical in relationship to discourse analysis in that they have developed out of a conceptually wider range of disciplines including anthropology, sociology, social psychology, speech communication, management or business communication, and even international political science. Adding to this problematicity has been the largely practical or applied nature of intercultural and cross-cultural communication studies. Researchers have often had much greater involvement with nonacademic colleagues in workplaces and with professionals than has been the case with most discourse analysts until relatively recently.

Further, there is sometimes an ambiguity in the use of the terms “intercultural” and “cross-cultural” communication. Although there is no widespread agreement on this, it would be taken that “intercultural communication” to signal the study of

distinct cultural or other groups *in interaction with each other*. That is to say, the comparative analysis of the groups or synthesis between them arises in this framework as part of the interaction of members of different groups with each other, and the analyst's role is to stand outside of the interaction and to provide an analysis of how the participants negotiate their cultural or other differences. As with cross-cultural analysis, the groups under study are often presupposed.

“Cross-cultural communication” would also be taken to signal the independent study of the communicative characteristics of distinct cultural or other groups (e.g. Bond 1986, 1988, in psychology and Hofstede 1993 in business communication). In the cross-cultural framework comparative analysis or synthesis is made by the analyst or researcher. That is to say, in research designed within the cross-cultural paradigm, the members of the distinct groups do not interact with each other within the study but are studied as separate and separable entities. In actual instances the distinctiveness of the groups under analysis is often presupposed. For example, Chinese are often contrasted with westerners, the considerable variability within each group being glossed over.

The Coming Together of Discourse Analysis and Intercultural Communication

Although dating the start of a field is, of course, impossible, scholars would date the field of intercultural communication as beginning with Bateson's “Culture contact and schismogenesis” (1935, reprinted in 1972). In that article he set out two of the principal problems of the field which he continued to elaborate in later work (1936, 1972). The first was the problem of reifying cultures as entities. That is, he argued that cultures must not be thought of as discrete, separable objects contacting each other, but as mere abstractions. Therefore it would be a mistake of false concreteness to use a metaphor of contact, influence of one upon another and the rest of the Newtonian language of structures in the analysis of culture.

The second problem he set out was that of developing an analytical language by which differences between cultures or groups - he clearly identified men and women, older generations and younger generations, different classes, clans, and young children and caretakers as relevant analytical groups - would be analyzed as mutually co-constructive, to use more contemporary terminology. Men and women position each other as members of different gender in their ordinary everyday interaction. By extending the study of contact to these groups which coexist in dynamic equilibrium, he hoped to understand the processes by which groups in conflict could become more harmoniously engaged.

Very closely related to this perspective, but more difficult to place historically because of the early lack of communication with the West, is the group now most frequently referenced through citations of Bakhtin (e.g. 1981) including Vygotsky (1978) and Volosinov (1986). British scholars began to reference this literature through Kristeva (1986); see also Fairclough (1992), though Goffman's (1974) citation of Uspensky (1973), who, in turn, cites Bakhtin, may show the entrance of this line of thought, first developed in the Soviet Union in the 1920s, into discourse analysis in North America in the 1970s. In any event, by the late 1970s or early 1980s it was coming to be taken as central that intertextuality and interdiscursivity were the fundamental nature of all texts. That is, all texts represent different voices engaged in implied if not actual dialog with each other. Uspensky (1973) analyzes Tolstoy's use of different naming practices and different languages to represent different points of view. As texts have

become understood as embedded in sociocultural contexts, all communication or discourse in this view is “intercultural.”

Paralleling this work was that of Gumperz (e.g. 1982) and a number of his students (notably Tannen 1984,1986) and others who brought discourse analysis to the service of solving problems of interracial, interethnic, and intercultural communication. Despite recent critiques of this work (Meeuwis 1994; Meeuwis and Sarangi 1994; Sarangi 1994; Shea 1994) as having ignored sociohistorical practice, power, and institutional racism as factors in intergroup communication, it would be argued that this line of research was the first, at least in North America, to seek to bridge the gap between discourse analysis and intercultural communication. Under the influence of Bateson, Gumperz and others in this group were seeking to analyze the production of social, economic, and racial discrimination in and through discourse as situated social practice.

Key elements of intercultural communication within this perspective were the focus on the production of complementary schismogenesis, contextualization cues, and the problematizing of reified cultures and other groups. Bateson (1972) defined complementary schismogenesis as the processes in social interactions by which small initial differences become amplified in response to each other through a sequence of interactional moves and ultimately result in a rupture in the social interaction. Contextualization cues are the metacommunicative cues (especially paralinguistic and prosodic features such as tone of voice and intonation) by which primary communication is interpreted. It was the insight of Gumperz that much of the complementary schismogenesis which results in racial, class, and other group stereotyping arises from differing uses and interpretation of contextualization cues. Because these contextualization cues are normally less explicitly referenced in communication, they are much more difficult to address by participants, and therefore their intention to “repair” the schismogenic interaction remains out of the conscious reach of people engaged in social interaction. This line of research acknowledges that socially given stereotypes which are brought to the process of communication are major factors in the interpretation of contextualization cues and therefore, as practical applied research, this work directed itself toward the explication of the processes by which stereotypes are formed.

Nondiscursive Cross-cultural and Intercultural Communication

Research such as that of Hofstede (1993) clearly exemplifies the field of cross-cultural research within a business or organizational context. Workers in this area tend to date their beginnings much more recently and seem relatively little aware of the much earlier research, it has been cited just above.

Another group, cross-cultural psychologists (e.g. Bond 1986,1988,1993,1996), date their origins largely from Cole et al. (1971), though some scholars in this area do not recognize the very important connections of Cole and his colleagues with the much earlier work of Vygotsky and Bakhtin. Perhaps most distinctive about this research is that it is largely experimental-quantitative in research design, that the cultural entities being researched are largely presupposed often national or “world” cultures - and that there is rarely any specific focus upon or analysis of concrete texts or discourses. Most of the scholars working in this line of research would use the term “cross-cultural” rather than “intercultural,” and application to concrete situations is achieved through experimentally derived inferences made by the researcher, not normally through the analysis of concrete, mutually co-constructed discourses.

As it has been just suggested, there is a bifurcation between cross-cultural studies of the Hofstede type, in which the characteristics of groups are analyzed through experimental or quantitative survey analysis, and the cross-cultural studies of the sociocultural school. This latter group, which would include Cole, Wertsch, and Gee, has sought to resolve what Wertsch calls the individual-society antinomy through a focus on mediated actions - that is, concrete situations in which action is being taken through the use of cultural tools appropriated for that purpose. With the mediated action as the unit of analysis, a typical situation calls for the use of what Wertsch (1991) terms a privileged cultural tool such as the vocabulary of scientific explanation mastered by some but by no means all students in science classes. Thus in this view, the role of texts is as tools for social action. This sociocultural school of psychologists references the same historical literature as the critical discourse analysts, such as Fairclough, Wodak, and van Dijk, though they rarely make reference to each other. Also, as it has been pointed out above, the interactional sociolinguistic group has at least indirectly inherited this same perspective through Goffman via Uspensky. Thus it would be argued that there has been a convergence among linguistic, discursive, or interactional sociolinguistic study of text on the one hand and a separation of this line of thinking from scholars who take a more apriorist view of languages and cultures on the other.

While it is outside the scope of this paper to consider it here, it has been argued elsewhere (Scollon 1997) that much of the research in cross-cultural communication (as it has been defined here) follows in a direct line from the military or governmental studies of national character (Bateson 1972; Benedict 1946) beginning during World War II, and extended after that by Hall and others at the Foreign Service Institute in Washington DC (Hall 1992). Thus this national focus, perhaps legitimate within wartime conditions, has been carried along without further problematization into contemporary analyses of "cultures" on behalf of business, governmental, and military organizations.

Foucaultian Discourse

In a series of highly influential books Foucault (1973a, 1973b, 1976, 1977a, 1977b) deconstructed the contemporary social sciences as reflecting what he called "epistemes" in some works and "orders of discourse" in others. Central to Foucault's writing is the concept that within sociocultural and historical periods are particular ways of seeing, analyzing, and acting in the world which distribute power such that participants in these periods take on the discipline of living out their periods' discourses. While Thomas Kuhn's analysis of scientific paradigms was focused more narrowly on the paradigm shifts which take place from time to time in science, many researchers across fields not normally thought of as discourse analysis found in the concept of Discourses (Gee 1989, 1996, 1999) or "orders of discourse" a conceptual framework that supported the deconstruction of reified cultural or social entities on the one hand and of apriorist views of the person on the other. Thus a number of researchers with an interest in literacy as a sociocultural phenomenon took up the question of whether literacy itself was an order of discourse.

This line of thinking, like the intercultural studies and discourse analysis studies mentioned earlier, also bifurcated in time between what Gee (1986) called "Great Divide" theorists - those who saw literacy as a broad sociocultural and reified entity that equipped persons and societies endowed with this special gift of abstraction with the machinery by which civilized society as we know it can flourish - and the social practice theorists,

who viewed literacy in terms of specific habits and skills inculcated in distinctive social settings. These latter, including Scribner and Cole (1981), analyzed literacy from the point of view of activity theory, thus problematizing the broad orders of discourse of the great divide theorists. Analyzing the development of literate practices as continuous with habits of speaking and interacting that identify readers and writers as members of particular classes of families takes the mystery out of literacy. There is a tension between determinism imposed by orders of discourse and individual human agency associated with the appropriation of cultural practices in mediated action toward one's own ends.

The Viability of the Concept of "Culture" in Intercultural Communication

These several lines of research have never been pursued entirely independently of each other, with the exception of the "Soviet" group, whose work was largely unreferenced in the West until the late 1970s and early 1980s. Since the early 1970s, it is fair to say that the concept of culture has been progressively restructured into other units or discourses which are seen as instantiations of social practices. The question is whether or not there is a useful notion of culture in a postcritical discourse world. Within discourse analysis and intercultural communication, cultural units have been dissolved into boundaryless forms of intertextuality and interdiscursivity. Culture has largely been demoted to the status of a minor discursive formation at best. That is, culture in the sense of "Chinese culture" or "European culture" might be used as one of a very wide range of discourses at play in any particular instance of discourse. At most, culture might be considered a kind of array or complex of other discursive formations.

In Orwellian fashion other historical forces are at play as well. For example, researchers working within sociocultural discourse analysis acknowledge their historical line of descent from the Soviet school of sociocultural analysis. In other places, however, this line of descent has taken rather particularistic turns. In China, for example, what is called "sociocultural historical psychology" arrived there from the Soviet Union in the form of Pavlovian conditioning in the strictest of experimental laboratory studies. During the Cultural Revolution this line of study was critiqued as having little to do with the practical lives of the people, and research in this tradition was suspended (Zhu 1989; Pan and Jing 1991). Even now, over two decades after the end of the Cultural Revolution, sociocultural research in China is attenuated at best. Thus there is the situation where many scholars in the West are taking up the sociocultural theme at just the time when scholars in China and the former Soviet Union are embracing the interculturalist or cross-culturalist research paradigms for the distance it gives them from earlier Marxist Utopian paradigms (Kamberelis and Scott 1992), as research itself becomes globalized.

Discourse as Constitutive of Cultural Categories

While researchers have arrived at the position from rather different directions, perhaps it can be said that a strongly unifying theme of discourse analysis and intercultural communication in the present decade is that all communication is constitutive of cultural categories. From this point of view the focus has shifted away from comparison between cultures or between individuals to a focus on the co-constructive aspects of communication.

With this change of focus has come a change in assumptions about the purposes of research and of the entities upon which analysis should be focused. Rather than seeking an explanation of how given identities and meanings are

communicated or fail to be communicated, what is sought is an understanding of how identities and meanings are constituted in and through the interaction itself. The role of culture and other a priori categories in this model is as historical and cultural archives of tools through which social actions are taken by participants.

According to Scollon and Scollon (1995), this approach to intercultural communication has been called a “discourse approach” and other scholars have preferred to call it “interdiscourse communication.” They take the position that in any instance of actual communication, they are multiply positioned within an indefinite number of Discourses (in the Gee sense) or within what they have called discourse systems. These discourse systems would include those of gender, generation, profession, corporate or institutional placement, regional, ethnic, and other possible identities. As each of these discourse systems is manifested in a complex network of forms of discourse, face relationships, socialization patterns and ideologies, this multiple membership and identity produces simultaneous internal (to the person) and external contradictions. Thus, it has been argued, it is as important a research problem to come to understand how a particular person in a particular action comes to claim, say, a generational identity over against the other multiple identities also contradictorily present in his or her own habits (Bourdieu 1977, 1990) as it is to try to come to understand any two individuals as positioned as culturally or ethnically different from each other. An interdiscursive approach to intercultural communication has led scholars to prefer to set aside any a priori notions of group membership and identity and to ask instead how and under what circumstances concepts such as culture are produced by participants as relevant categories for interpersonal ideological negotiation.

This approach to intercultural communication as discourse analysis has led to what would be now called mediated discourse (Scollon 1995, 1997, 1999; Scollon and Scollon 1997, 1998; Scollon 1998). A mediated discourse perspective shifts from a focus on the individuals involved in communication, and from their interpersonal or intercultural or even interdiscursive relationship, to a focus on mediated action as a kind of social action. The central concern is now not persons but social change.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it might be sketch out quite roughly how these different approaches would handle a characteristic research problem. The approach implied by the title of this paper “discourse and intercultural communication” would assume first that individuals are members of different cultural groups and that their communication can be studied as a problem in communication through a discursive analysis of the characteristic communication of members of those groups. Thus a cross-cultural approach would begin with the problem that a German was to communicate with a Chinese. This might be derived from business or diplomatic concerns on the practical side or from an anthropological or social psychological perspective on the theoretical side. In either case, one might expect that experimentally designed studies or quantitative survey studies would be set up to test differences in values, perceptions, the typical structure of genres, rates of speaking and of turning over turns, gestural and other nonverbal communication systems, or of world view and ideology.

An intercultural or interactional sociolinguistic approach would identify people from these different groups who are in social interaction with each other. Through a close analysis of the discourse actually produced, the analyst would first identify

breakdowns in communication, then try to find the sources of the breakdowns in the language used as well as in the misinterpretation of contextualization cues. Differences between the participants would most likely be understood as arising from a history of socialization to different groups and therefore a misunderstanding of contextualization cues in the actual situation of communicating with each other.

A mediated discourse approach would begin by asking why the problem was posed in the first place as a problem in communication between members of different cultural or other discourse-based groups. The primary question would be: what is the social action in which a person is interested and how does this analysis promise to focus on some aspect of social life that is worth understanding? This concern with social action would treat the group identities of the participants as problematical only to the extent that such membership can be shown to be productive of ideological contradiction, on the one hand, or that the participants themselves call upon social group membership in making strategic claims within the actions under study, on the other. Thus the analysis would not presuppose cultural membership but rather ask how does the concept of culture arise in these social actions? Who has introduced culture as a relevant category, for what purposes, and with what consequences?

In this sense a mediated discourse analysis is a way of erasing the field of intercultural communication by dissolving the foundational questions and reconstituting the research agenda around social action, not categorical memberships or cultural genres. Conversation or narrative or talk itself is not given pride of place. Discourse is just one of the ways in which social action may be mediated, albeit commonly a very significant one. Thus culture is possibly relevant when it is empirically an outcome or means of actions taken by social actors, but to start from culture or intercultural or interdiscourse memberships is to start with a theoretical commitment to groups which is not a primary conceptual entity in mediated discourse theory; groups such as cultures are taken to be the outcomes of social actions and of histories but to have no direct causal status in themselves.

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