



Discourse

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Abstract 'Discourse' refers to the idea that language is structured according to different patterns that people's situated text and talk take in different domains of social life. Discourse studies have included historical, ethnographic, political, cognitive and linguistic directions of research and theory, in the work of Foucault, Laclau and Mouffe, Fairclough, Gee and Žižek, among many others.

Discourse refers to language in use or to situated text and talk. The study of discourse takes moments of sustained discourse as the basic units of analysis, rather than sentences or grammatical structures as traditionally studied in linguistics. Underlying the attention to discourse is the general idea that people's utterances or writings follow different patterns when they take part, for particular purpose or as certain kinds of people, in specific domains of social life. Discourse analysis is the analysis of these patterns, starting from the premise that language uses do not merely reflect or represent social or mental realities but help to construct or constitute those realities. Critical discourse theoretical approaches frequently combine post-Marxist social thought and post-Saussurian linguistics to study the discursive processes which are used to manufacture popular consent for the unequal distribution of material and social resources. Foucault (1970) understood discourses as institutionalised sets of understandings and statements, or regimes of knowledge, that impose limits on what is taken to be true or false at particular historical moments and which shape how persons see themselves and their world. Discourse studies vary in their emphases and have included historical, ethnographic, political, cognitive and linguistic directions of research and theory. Amongst several distinct strands of contemporary critical discourse theory, Laclau and Mouffe (1985) saw all social processes, not just language, as discursive processes and that all discourses are political, where knowledge, identity and social relations are discursively produced as effects of power. Their view is that the constitution of a discourse involves the structuring of signifiers into certain meanings to the exclusion of other meanings. They drew on Gramsci's concept of hegemony which identifies the processes whereby dominant classes within society use discursive processes to manufacture popular consent for the unequal distribution of power and wealth. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), particularly Fairclough's (2003) work, restricts the concept of discourse to text, talk and other semiological systems (e.g. gestures and fashion) keeping it distinct from but closely tied to other dimensions of social practice and social structure. The linguistic features of texts and talk, their semantic, grammatical and lexical features, are seen to be connected to their social functions through their genres and styles. These are shaped by the causal powers of social structures and social practices which text and talk draw upon and articulate together within orders of discourse. Changes in forms of action and interaction in society include change in genres, so that, for example, genre change is studied as an important part of the transformations of new capitalism (Fairclough, 2000). Gee's (2005) model of critical discourse analysis examines the way persons use language to enact a particular socially-situated identity, by giving words situated meanings and by using cultural models of how to write, think, believe, value, act and interact. Žižek's (2007) perspective, drawing on Lacan, is that discourse constructs the human subject, but the subject it constructs is not just decentered but fissured or fragmented, and that this fissuring applies both to human

interaction and to conceptions of knowledge, logic and truth, precluding the possibility of direct communication.

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