

## **The Discourse, Cognition, Society Framework**

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### **Introduction**

This paper aims to summarize and justify the interdisciplinary framework of my approach to the study of discourse of the last decades. This framework presupposes my earlier research on text grammar, the psychology of discourse processing and critical discourse studies. The general feature of the framework is the thesis that there is no direct relation between discourse structures and sociopolitical structures, and that this relation needs to be formulated in terms of a cognitive interface. The main argument of this thesis is that discourse structures and sociopolitical structures are of a fundamentally different nature, but that both can be related in terms of mental representations within a social constructionist paradigm. This framework is not only crucial for the theory and methods of critical discourse studies (CDS), but more generally relevant for any kind of discourse study.

### **The Development of Discourse Studies**

After a history that goes back to classical rhetoric and poetics, the cross-discipline of Discourse Studies (DS) emerged in the 1960s and 1970s in several disciplines of the humanities and social sciences.

Modern linguistics, a century ago, started with a structural account of words in terms of a semiotics of signs, their expression (*signifiants*) and meanings (*signifiés*), as basic units of language defined as systems. In the following decades these units were made more explicit in terms of morphology and phonology, and their grammatical combinations in clauses and sentences in structural and generative-transformational grammars. The meanings of these more complex units, however, could hardly be accounted for in such grammatical frameworks, and linguistics already had to have

recourse to approaches in philosophy of language and logic, for instance in terms of propositions, truth values or possible world semantics.

In the 1960s this limited account of language in terms of sentence grammars was challenged from different perspectives. A more empirical approach to the study of language and especially language use obviously is not limited to clauses and sentences, but needs to account for more complex units of text and talk, consisting of sequences of sentences or turns of interaction, as well as larger schematic structures such as those of narration and argumentation, among many others, e. g. as studied in literature and philosophy. Indeed, whereas arbitrary sequences of words do not form grammatical and meaningful sentences, the same is true for arbitrary sequences of clauses or sentences not making well-formed, meaningful discourses. Thus, text grammars began to be developed to account for the crucial notion of the local and global (semantic) coherence of sequences of sentences and texts and talk as a whole and their formal schematic organization in terms of various kinds of superstructures typical of different genres of discourse.

The history of the study of language in the 20<sup>th</sup> century shows how the object or unit of study was systemically increased from words to complex discourses, and from grammar to more complex theoretical accounts in terms of semantics, pragmatics, sociolinguistics, semiotics, cognitive science, or philosophy. This interdisciplinary extension of the study of language and language use in terms of the structures, meanings and functions of discourse, already went beyond the field of classical structural or generative linguistics:

- Anthropology, and especially the ethnography of communication, extended the study of language to the analysis of complex communicative events.
- Sociolinguistics, interested in actual language use, focuses on socially based variations of phonology and phonetics, and on special contextual ‘cues’ of language use.
- Psycholinguistics, interested in the production and comprehension of language not only explained such processes in terms of grammars as forms of cognitive representations and memory limitations, but soon needed a broader cognitive account to explain the complex conditions of discourse coherence and organization.

- The philosophy of language at the same time contributed to the study of language use as speech acts and conversational postulates.
- The semiotics of images, gestures and music developed to a sophisticated approach of multimodal discourse analysis.
- Finally, the microsociology of interaction and ethnomethodology contributed to the fundamental transition from text to the dynamic interaction of conversation.

With these multidisciplinary developments, discourse had become a vastly more complex notion than the early studies of words and their meanings – today still relevant in sophisticated quantitative corpus linguistic methods and notions such as collocations and keywords, earlier studied in content analysis – still used in the social sciences. Structural analysis of increasingly complex units and levels is complemented by formal logical analysis, ethnography or experiments in the laboratory. Language and language use as discourse and interaction are no longer studied in linguistics, but in the humanities and social sciences more generally.

Despite the sophistication of these multidisciplinary approaches to language and discourse, there are still serious limitations in the study of discourse. One limitation is that in the same way as arbitrary sequences of words don't make well-formed and meaningful discourses, also larger units or collections of discourse need to be accounted for, as is the case in parliamentary debates, newspaper discourse, websites, Facebook posts, advertising, and many more. Even complex semantic notions of coherence do not suffice to analyze the complex structures of multimodal multi-discourse entities, for which we even don't have a general name.

Another limitation of these contemporary developments in the study of discourse is their theoretical integration. Each (sub) discipline introduced and used its own theoretical notions and methods of analysis, only with occasional links, e.g., between grammar and conversational interaction, between semantics and logic, or between the pragmatics of speech acts or politeness and the sociology of power and status. Indeed, the many types of discourse structure are not systematically related to the many types of social or political structures on the one hand, or the many types of cognitive processes and representations. Theories of critical studies of discourse, however, need such multidisciplinary integration. In the rest of this chapter, we summarize some of the elements of such a multidisciplinary integration of the theory of discourse and its application in the critical analysis.

## The Discourse-Society Link

The social sciences, especially anthropology and sociology, together with sociolinguistics, conversation analysis and critical discourse studies, have jointly contributed to our understanding of the complex links between discourse and society, and hence need less extensive summary here.

The ethnography of speaking approach in anthropology defined discourse in terms of more complex *communicative events*, featuring not only (structures of) text or talk, but also participants with various ethnic or social identities and roles, nonverbal activity, rules, norms and values, etc.

At the same time in the 1960s, the philosophy of language, reformulated text and talk in terms of speech acts and the conditions of their appropriateness, though still often related to (isolated) sentences, instead of complex discourses. The study of conversational postulates more broadly related discourse to social situations, for instance in the study of implicatures – but limited to philosophical analysis rather than in terms of actual talk in social situations.

Conversation analysis, focusing on talk, defined such discourse in terms of interaction at the microlevel of social organization, e.g., in terms of rules of turn change and allocation, sequences of turns, alignments of speakers or turns with previous ones, opening and closing conversations or rules of epistemic priorities in storytelling, among a vast number of other constraints of talk in interaction. Discourse Analysis in this case is at the same time a form of the sociology of interaction.

Sociolinguistics, though still within linguistics, and hence initially primarily focused on grammatical units of phonemes and words, introduced sociological notions of classes, castes or groups in order to account for socially conditioned variations. Later sociolinguistics also studied discourse types associated with special groups or categories of speakers, such as those defined in terms of social class, race, ethnicity, age, sexuality or profession, e.g., in terms of contextualization clues indexing such social constraints.

Finally, Critical Discourse Studies, since the end of the 1970s, systematically examined the ways social and political power is enacted or resisted in text and talk, for

instance in the study of (anti) racisms, sexism, classism, and many other forms of domination, opposition and solidarity – integrating the other (sub) disciplines and approaches mentioned above.

Hence, many developments in linguistics and discourse studies of the last decades have extensively studied relations between text or talk and social micro and macro structures. We'll see below, however, what their theoretical limitations are, because obviously social structures and discourse structures are very different, so it is not yet clear how the former can influence the latter, or vice versa.

## **The Discourse-Cognition Link**

The link between discourse and cognition has been studied less extensively than the link between discourse and society. A first dimension was discussed already by Chomsky in the theory of generative grammar in the form of a special 'language device' acquired and shared by native speakers so as to be able to learn and use the language.

Psycholinguistics, usually in the form of laboratory experiments, elaborated this view in terms of the knowledge and rules of language users for the comprehension and production of grammatical sentences.

Later, the subdiscipline of Cognitive Linguistics proposed a more direct relationship between meaning and cognition in the form of theories of metaphor, or cognitive grammars to account for the meanings of words in the form of frames, consisting of organized fragments of knowledge.

Whereas these approaches are generally limited to word meanings and sentence grammars, cognitive psychology of the 1970s for the first time also was engaged in the study of the mental processes and representation involved in the comprehension and production of discourse. First it proposed that the memory system would allow processing such complex units, because Short Term Memory can only hold about 7 words. Secondly, it would need to make sure that language users are able to understand or produce coherence between the meanings (propositions) of sequences of clauses or sentences. Thirdly, it would need to show how they are also able to organize discourse fragments in terms of the categories of specific discourse types or genres, such as the Title and Lead of a news report, the Introduction or Conclusion of an academic paper, the premises and conclusions of an argumentation or the structural categories of a

narrative. Both in cognitive psychology as well as more broadly in cognitive science, these systems of discourse production and comprehension needed to show how knowledge is activated to allow discourse processing, for instance in terms of knowledge schemata such as scripts. To account for the meaning and coherence of stories new notions were introduced, such as mental models of events. This approach also corrected old notions of coherence, for instance in structural semantics, in terms of relations between smaller meaning components (semes), such as HUMAN. Rather, coherence of discourse is not defined in terms of meaning relations, but in terms of relations between the referents of expressions, such as temporal or causal relations between events or situations referred by whole clauses or sentences.

The relevance of the study of the link between discourse and cognition is shown in the account of a vast number of properties of sentences and discourses, which can briefly be summarized as follows, and which would all be part of an **epistemic, doxastic or ideological analysis of discourse:**

**Words:** Producing and understanding words requires the activation of the specific mental lexicon of specific languages, and more general knowledge of the world.

**Lexical variation:** may depend on the opinions and ideologies (e.g. *terrorist* vs. *freedom fighter*)

**Modalities:** Depend on the kind of knowledge about facts or events: possibility, probability, etc.

**Evidentiality:** Knowledge about the source(s) of knowledge

**Metaphor:** Conceptual analysis of meaning and knowledge

**(In)definite articles:** Knowledge presupposed to be shared by recipients

**Topic/Comment:** Relations between old/given and new/emphasized knowledge

**Syntax:** Structures of Mental Models (Agents, Patients, etc)

**Complexity of Syntax:** Limitations of Short-Term Memory

**Implications/Presuppositions:** Structures of knowledge

**Local and Global Coherence:** Mental Models

**Polarization of meanings:** Ideologies (relations between Ingroups and Outgroups)

**Argumentation:** Structures of knowledge

**Discourse genres:** Knowledge of genre rules and structures

**Speech Acts:** Mental models of the communicative situation (Context Models)

This is merely a brief list of the multiple ways the structures of words, sentences and discourses are related to the complex system of cognition. We see that many of these structures are related to the (structures) of the knowledge (shared) by the participants.

### **Cognition as Necessary Interface between Discourse and Society**

With this cognitive approach we now also have a more explicit idea how discourse can be related to the social structures mentioned above. For instance, language use may vary as a function of the social identity, status or relative power of the participants. Such a social condition can only influence for instance the selection of words, politeness markers, speech acts, and the ideological polarization of discourse between Us vs. Them, if such social relations are represented in the mental model of the communicative situation, that is, in the Context Models of the participants. This also the way language users can express or resist racist or sexist discourse.

We see that many aspects of discourse are related to the ways the participants of discourse know and represent other people, actions and events and situations they talk *about* (controlling the semantics of discourse) as well as the communicative situations *in which* they participate (controlling the pragmatics of discourse). This means that learning to understand discourse also depends on learning about the structures of the world and hence the acquisition of socioculturally shared knowledge. One of the implications of this complex framework relating discourse structures to social structures via a cognitive interface is that also social or critical analysis of discourse is incomplete without a cognitive component. Without such a component, for instance, all people in the same social situation would speak in the same way if there were a direct causal relation between social and discourse structures. Hence, the social status or power of speakers does not, as such, *cause* them to use less polite words or aggressive speech acts, but such is only possible when such speaker self-represent themselves as powerful in the current communicative situation, that is as a property of their context models. Without such a sociocognitive approach all observations between sentence or discourse structures and social structures would only be accounted for in the descriptive terms of statistical correlations, but would be unable to *explain* why such correlations exist, and why there are interesting personal variations between speakers of the same social group or community and in the same situation.

## Examples

To illustrate the theoretical framework summarized above, let us give a few examples of the cognitive interface between discourse and society. Our data are drawn from a new project on the discourse of social movement, and specifically of a study of the movement of Refugees Welcome, which since the summer of 2015 assisted the many refugees arriving in Western Europe, especially from Syria. The examples in this paper are borrowed from interviews with British women who volunteered to assist refugees in the camp of Calais in France, recorded and studied by my colleague, sociologist Pierre Monforte.

One of the interesting features of these interviews is the *modesty* of the women volunteers. Different from many activists, they do not boast of their activities. On the contrary, they engage in many discursive moves and strategies to downplay their otherwise admirable initiative and action.

In this paper, we do not enter in the broader theoretical framework on social movement discourse, nor on the philosophical and psychological analysis of the concept of modesty. Here we are only interested in the relations between some of the properties of “modest talk” on the one hand and the social situation of these women, and how this relation is mediated by cognition.

Our example will focus on the use of the adverb *just* as used in the interviews with British volunteer women. Here is an example of a fragment of the interview with a woman who very often uses *just*:

(1)

I So, you drove there with your van, or with the van...

R Yeah.

I ...**just** to bring donations?

R Yeah, yeah. And then, but then I **just** felt like I wanted to do more, I wanted to get more hands-on with what was going on there, so me and Millie **just** planned a few trips out and spent about a month each time out there, **just** working in the camps basically, and **just**, you know, distributing aid and **just** giving people moral support, and **just** befriending people, and **just** tryna, you know, bring a bit of humanity into their situation really. So yeah, it was all kind of, it was all kind of a happy accident really [laughs] (UK40, 51-56).

I *Então, você dirigiu lá com sua van, ou com a van ...*

R Yeah.

I *....só para trazer doações?*

R: *Yeah, yeah. E então, mas então eu simplesmente senti que queria fazer mais, eu queria colocar mais a mão na massa com o que estava acontecendo lá, então eu e Millie planejamos algumas viagens e passamos cerca de um mês de cada vez lá, apenas trabalhar nos campos basicamente, e apenas, você sabe, distribuir ajuda e apenas dar às pessoas apoio moral, e apenas fazer amizade com as pessoas, e apenas tentar, você sabe, trazer um pouco de humanidade para a situação delas. Então, sim, foi tudo meio que um acidente feliz, de verdade [risos]*

A multidisciplinary analysis of the use of *just* in this example and in this interview, first identifies the word as the grammatical category adverb, often modifying verbs.

### *Lexical and grammatical analysis*

As such, the adverb has several meanings, including meaning and functions not relevant for our analysis, such as in such expressions as in *She has **just** arrived* (a short while ago), or *She is **just** leaving* (right at this moment). Some uses of *just* may emphasize the force of a speech act, as in ***Just** shut up!* This meaning of *just* is also expressed by the woman when she says *I **just** felt I wanted to do more*, emphasizing the assertion about her emotions. Indeed, deleting this *just* does not change the meaning (or truth value) of the clause, only the pragmatic or rhetorical aspect of the statements changes.

In the example of the interview, the interviewer initiates this fragment with a question about the women's activities as a volunteer: bringing donations to the refugee camp. This question, however, uses the word *just* in a sense that could be paraphrased as "only" or "no more than", and hence has a quantifying function in the sense of minimizing the force of an activity. In her reply the woman also uses this *just* as modification of the various activities, such as ***just** planning, **just** working, **just** befriending people*. In this case, the meaning of the adverb is also a type of quantification, and may be paraphrased as "no more than". It is at this point where lexical or grammatical analysis reaches its limits. Indeed, *why* would this woman repeat this expression, in this and many other turns of the interview?

### *Discursive, narrative, rhetorical and conversation analysis*

Further analysis of *just* and its use in this fragment, needs to enter analysis beyond the lexicon and grammar, and first of all needs to add a *narrative analysis*, because in her reply to the question of the interviewer she tells (part of) a story, narratively emphasising the point that “this was all she and her sister did”, which could also be paraphrased as “no big deal”.

At the same time, this narrative is part of an interview, and a reply to a question and hence needs to be accounted for as part of an interaction, and hence even further removed from a mere grammatical, semantic or narrative analysis. So, the whole story as reply to a question functions to minimize her role as volunteer. Such an interactional move has several social functions, part of a more general strategy of self-presentation, studied in classical work in social psychology and Conversation Analysis. Whereas in many situations in which members may enhance social activities as help or assistance, this woman does the opposite: she many ways mitigates the value of her activities. In that case, we may ask why would she do that? What is the interactional function of this kind of self-deprecation?

### *Social Analysis: Doing Modesty*

In order to explain that specific function of “mitigated” self-presentation, we need to leave a pragmatic or conversation analysis, and bring to bear broader social aspects of interviews about the solidarity of women volunteers. First of all, this kind of strategy is different from activist discourse boasting important protest actions, and hence more typical of the discourse of volunteers. Volunteers are defined as doing things without any self-interest, and only in the interest of those who need it.

Secondly, we may also assume that it is more typical of women refugees, and hence has important gender functions: the women in these interviews are typically being *modest*. They are doing *modesty*. Indeed, in the history and philosophy of the value of modesty, this value is often associated with women.

This aspect of the analysis already advances the social aspects of the functions of *just* as used in interviews or conversations. But besides its linguistic (lexical, grammatical, semantic, pragmatic or narrative) and these interactional functions, we still are not ready with a complete analysis. We finally also need cognitive analysis. First of

all, at the level of words, the woman needs to activate her knowledge of the English language, and specifically her knowledge of the meaning of the word *just* in her mental lexicon, a meaning also expressed by an expression as “no more than”, and in other languages as in *só* in Portuguese. At the same time she needs to know that this adverb typically modifies verbs and hence its meaning applies to activities.

### *Cognitive Analysis*

Also the interactional and social functions need an important cognitive analysis. First of all, the woman tells a story about her activities. This means she needs to (re) activate her personal mental model of these activities as construed during these activities, and that provides the very *semantic coherence* of this fragment.

At the same time the woman knows that at this moment she is participating in an interview with a scholar interested in solidarity and volunteering for refugees. This means that ongoingly in the interview she has a *mental model of the communicative situation* (a *context model*) featuring the type of interaction and the identities and roles of the participants, including her own identities as English, woman and volunteer, and her interactional roles as current speaker and storyteller. It is with this context model in mind that she wants to make a good impression, as is probably the case in many or most conversations and interviews. But in this case, such is not so much the case to enhance her identity of being English, or being a woman, but rather for her identity as volunteer. To emphasize this (positive) function of being a volunteer she needs to play down the value of her activities as a volunteer – in which case boasting would certainly make a bad impression.

This interactional analysis of the woman in the ongoing construction of the context model that controls her participation in the interview presupposes *general knowledge* about volunteering, and in this case of helping refugees, the kind of activities the refugees need (like befriending them, bringing a bit of humanity) – and vast complex of social, political and historical knowledge expressed and presupposed in the interview – but not analyzed here.

But even this knowledge is not sufficient, and in order for the woman as volunteer to know what is “good” or “bad” for refugees, she needs to activate, socially shared *attitudes* about volunteering action – that is she is also speaking as member of an

ingroup of volunteers, with knowledge about volunteers and refugees as well as norms and values of their assistance.

Finally, these attitudes are basically controlled by more fundamental ideologies of solidarity, humanitarianism, antiracism, etc. – ideologies that indirectly control many aspects of the interviews. Typical, for instance, is the expression of polarization between ingroup and outgroup, where the (British and European) governments are the outgroup, representing as unwilling to help the refugees. So when this woman lists her (mitigated) activities, she also implies that Others (governments etc) don't do so. The same is true for the mitigated expression of a bit of humanity, a value respected by governments.

### *Conclusion*

We see that just (sic!) to fully understand and analyze a simple adverb like just in an interview with women volunteers, we need to activate many types of linguistic or discursive, interactional, social, political and cognitive analysis. Indeed, only complex Discourse-Society-Cognition framework is able to provide an adequate analysis, description and explanation. A fully fledged analysis of all these dimensions of the meanings and functions of just in this interview would probably require many more pages than this brief summary of the analysis.

## **References**

Complete references for all aspects of the Discourse-Cognition-Society framework would require a bibliography of hundreds of titles. I therefore must refer to my earlier work on text grammar, the psychology of text processing, Critical Discourse Studies, (anti) racism, ideology, context, knowledge, and my ongoing studies of social movements (see my website for references on these projects). A longer paper on the topic of “doing modesty” is in preparation with Pierre Montforte.



