CHAPTER 1

Introduction

This chapter focuses on the various meanings of the terms ‘discourse’ and ‘Discourse Analysis/Studies’, highlights a number of features of discourse and Discourse Analysis/Studies, considers the notion of communicative competence and its relation to discourse and explains how it is an appropriate goal for Language Education. The chapter concludes with a brief overview of the rest of the book.

1.1 DEFINING DISCOURSE

There are various usages of the term discourse, but we will begin here by defining it broadly as language in its contexts of use. In considering language in its contexts of use, the concern is also with language above the level of the sentence. The emphasis on contexts of use and the suprasentential level is important, because for much of the history of modern linguistics, under the influence of the generative linguist Chomsky, language has been analysed as separate from context, as decontextualised sentences. The rationale for a contextualised and suprasentential consideration of language is based upon the belief that knowing a language is concerned with more than just grammar and vocabulary: it also includes how to participate in a conversation or how to structure a written text. To be able to do this, it is necessary to take into account the context, or situation, in which a particular use of language occurs and how the units of language combine together and structure the overall discourse.

More restricted in sense, the term discourse can also be used to refer to a particular set of ideas and how they are articulated, such as the discourse of environmentalism, the discourse of neoliberalism or the discourse of feminism. In this case, the term refers to a type of specialised knowledge and language used by a particular social group. This meaning is associated with French post-structuralist thinkers such as Michel Foucault. It will be particularly important in Chapter 10.

The discourse analyst Gee (2011a) memorably refers to the first of the two meanings of discourse considered thus far – discourse as language in the contexts of its use and above the level of the sentence – as little ‘d’ discourse and the second meaning – discourse as ideas and how they are articulated – as big ‘D’ discourses (note the first is always singular, while the second can be pluralised).

1.2 DEFINING DISCOURSE STUDIES AND DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Following our definition of discourse in the previous section, Discourse Analysis, or, to use a more recent term, Discourse Studies can be defined as the study of language in its contexts of use and above the level of the sentence. The more recent term Discourse Studies is perhaps more appropriate than the older term, Discourse Analysis, because it gets away from the misconception that the field is only concerned with analysis (that it is just a method), while it is also concerned with theory.
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and application (and it comprises a host of methods) (van Dijk, 2001b). Both terms will be used in this book: Discourse Analysis to refer to the actual analysis, and Discourse Studies to refer to the field, or discipline, in general.

Discourse Studies, as a discipline, is arguably most closely associated with linguistics, but is essentially an interdisciplinary activity, employed in such diverse fields as anthropology, business studies, communication studies, cultural studies, educational studies, environmental studies, law, literary studies, media studies, philosophy, politics, psychology, sociology, and many others, in addition to linguistics.

1.3 DISCOURSE ANALYSIS MAY EMPHASISE DISCOURSE STRUCTURE OR DISCOURSE FUNCTION OR BOTH

As in physics, chemistry or biology, Discourse Analysis may involve structural analysis. Here a text or group of texts would be broken down into their component parts. These parts (which are, in fact, usually determined in terms of their functions, or meanings) might be based on the topics or turns at speaking, in spoken discourse, or the paragraphs and sentences, or propositions, in written discourse (more technical units will be presented later). A structural approach to Discourse Analysis might also look at how elements of language are held together in coherent units.

Instead of, or in addition to, a structural analysis, Discourse Analysis might take a functional approach. Here the discourse analyst considers the particular meanings and communicative forces associated with what is said or written. This approach to discourse considers language as a type of communicative action. It considers questions such as the following: How is language used persuasively – e.g. to request, accept, refuse, complain? What sort of language is polite language? How do people use language to convey meanings indirectly? What constitutes racist or sexist language? How do people exercise power through their use of language? What might be the hidden motivations behind certain uses of language?

Alternatively, in a functional approach, the discourse analyst might look at particular discourse genres (Chapter 8). Here the discourse analyst asks: How is language used in academic essays, in research articles, in conference presentations, in letters, in reports and in meetings? Here the concern is again with communicative purposes or communicative action, but the focus is on particular contexts of use.

Then again, in a functional approach to discourse, the analyst might consider how language is used by particular social groups (known as register analysis: see Chapter 2). How do teachers or politicians or business executives use language? How do men and women vary in their use of language? What is particular about the language used by such people that it identifies them as belonging to particular social groups?

Functional analysis suggests a qualitative rather than a quantitative methodology and, indeed, most Discourse Analysis is qualitative in nature. The concern is not with measuring and counting, but with describing. However, with the use of computers, quantitative analysis has received more attention and discourse analysts may also use computers to derive quantitative findings; for example, on the relative frequency of particular language patterns by different individuals or social groups in particular texts or groups of texts. This approach to Discourse Analysis is known as Corpus Linguistics and will be dealt with in Chapter 9.

1.4 DISCOURSE ANALYSIS MAY FOCUS ON ANY SORT OF TEXTS

Discourse Analysis may focus on any sort of text, written or spoken. The term ‘text’, in Discourse Analysis, refers to any stretch of spoken or written language. In written text, Discourse Analysis may consider texts as diverse as news reports, textbooks, company reports, personal letters, business
letters, e-mails and faxes. In spoken discourse, it may focus on casual conversations, business and other professional meetings, service encounters (buying and selling goods and services) and classroom lessons, among many others.

While Discourse Analysis has traditionally focused on written and spoken text, in recent years it has started to extend its field of activity to consider multimodal discourse, where written and/or spoken text is combined with visual or aural dimensions, such as television programmes, movies, websites, museum exhibits and advertisements of various kinds. These texts, which form the data of Discourse Analysis, may be contemporary or historical. Indeed, Discourse Analysis has much to offer historical studies (Flowerdew, 2012a).

1.5 THERE ARE VARIOUS APPROACHES TO DISCOURSE STUDIES

Discourse Studies may adopt various approaches to analysis. Some of the main approaches will be used as the organising principle of this book: they include register analysis (Chapter 2), which studies the typical features of particular fields of activity or professions; cohesion, coherence and thematic development (Chapters 3–4), which investigate how text is held together, in terms of both structure and function; Pragmatics (Chapters 5–6), which studies language in terms of the actions it performs; Conversation Analysis (Chapter 7), which takes a microanalytic approach to spoken interaction; Genre Analysis (Chapter 8), which studies language in terms of the different recurrent stages it goes through in specific contexts; Corpus-based Discourse Analysis (Chapter 10), which uses computers in the analysis of very large bodies of text (known as corpora – singular corpus) in order to identify particular phraseologies (wordings) and rhetorical patterning; and Critical Discourse Analysis (Chapter 10), which interprets texts from a social perspective, analysing power relations and cases of manipulation and discrimination in discourse. These are just some of the approaches. There are numerous others and many discourse analysts adopt an eclectic or hybrid approach.1

1.6 DISCOURSE ANALYSIS IS CONDUCTED IN MANY FIELDS OF ACTIVITY

Discourse Analysis is conducted in many fields, both informal and institutional. In informal fields, Discourse Analysis has been used to analyse how people interact in conversation and in service encounters, as already mentioned, and to analyse how they tell stories, how they gossip and how they chat. In formal fields, Discourse Analysis has been fruitfully employed in the political arena, in analysing the media, in the law, in healthcare, and in business and other forms of bureaucracy.

1.7 DISCOURSE STUDIES FOCUS ON LANGUAGE IN ITS CONTEXTS OF USE

The definition given above for Discourse Studies refers to the study of language in its contexts of use. But what is meant exactly by this term context? Another word for context is situation. In order to understand the meaning of an utterance2, one needs to know the particular features of the situation in which it was uttered. In a very well-known study, Hymes (1972a) identified 16 features of situation, or context, some of which are listed as follows:

- the physical and temporal setting;
- the participants (speaker or writer, listener or reader);
- the purposes of the participants;
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- the channel of communication (e.g. face to face, electronic, televised, written);
- the attitude of the participants;
- the genre, or type of speech event: poem, lecture, editorial, sermon;
- background knowledge pertaining to the participants.

How do features of context such as these affect meaning and the analyst’s interpretation of meaning? We can understand the role of context if we consider in what situations certain utterances might or might not be appropriate. To take some examples, first, for the contextual feature participants, an expression such as ‘Sit down!’ is likely to be interpreted as appropriate when spoken by a parent to a child. When addressed to a superior, however, it would likely be interpreted as rude. The important variable, therefore, in this example, is the participants, whether one of them is a child or a superior. To take another example, this time for channel of communication, the following might be perfectly acceptable as a text message sent via the channel of a mobile phone: ‘CUL8ER’ (that is to say, ‘see you later’), but sent by means of another channel, such as a business letter, it would more likely be perceived as uneducated or rude. To take a third example, here for background knowledge, suppose two people are playing a game and one says to the other ‘Make sure you follow all the rules.’ This person is relying on the other person knowing what these rules are. It would be redundant to have to specify all of the rules. In this way, background knowledge makes communication more efficient.

Another element of context that needs to be considered is the text surrounding an utterance, what has come before and what comes later. Consider the following exchange:

A. These bananas cost 3 dollars.
B. I’ll take them.

In this exchange, them in B’s statement can only be interpreted in the light of part of what has been mentioned previously by A, that is to say, bananas. Consider now the following two statements, which are linked together:

I have a problem. I haven’t got any money.

Problem, here, can be explicated by what follows it, that is to say, the problem is that I do not have enough money. This type of context is commonly referred to as co-text or linguistic context (in contrast to extralinguistic context).

van Dijk (2008: x) stresses how contexts are ‘not some kind of objective condition or direct cause’, but are, rather, subjective constructs that develop over the course of an interaction. Individuals each develop and define their own contexts according to their ‘(on-going) subjective interpretations of communicative situations’ (van Dijk, 2008: x). Context, for van Dijk, is thus not just a social phenomenon, but a sociocognitive one.

In Chapter 2, we will consider another model of context, that of Systemic Functional Linguistics, which consists of three broad parameters: field (the subject matter of the text), tenor (the relations between the participants and their attitudes) and mode (how the language is organised and functions in the text).

In Discourse Analysis, as Blommaert (2001: 15) has warned, the analyst’s selection of what is relevant in the context in order to interpret a text is crucial. An emphasis on a particular element of the context is likely to affect the analyst’s interpretation of the text.

1.8 DISCOURSE IS INTERTEXTUAL

The simplest form of Discourse Analysis is of a single text. Increasingly, though, discourse analysts have come to accept the importance of considering other texts in the analysis of a given text. One
text cannot be understood except in relation to other texts which have gone before (and, indeed, which are likely to follow). Other texts, of course, are one facet of context. For instance, in the reference to the rules of the game in section 1.7 above, presumably, in assuming common knowledge of the rules, the participants in the interaction would have come across these rules on previous occasions in (spoken or written) texts. The intertextuality (Bhaktin, 1981) in this example – how one text relates back to another text or texts – is made explicit. Another example of intertextuality, which is even more explicit, would be direct quotation of one text in another, indicated through the use of inverted commas.

Very often, however, intertextual links are implicit. Implicit intertextuality is extremely common in newspaper headlines and various types of advertisement. The following is an example of language promoting the AXN television channel: ‘There’s a time to ask not what you can do for your country, but what you can watch on AXN.’ The intertextuality here is based on a famous statement made by the US President, John F. Kennedy: ‘Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country.’ The intertextuality with the AXN promotion is created through the use of parallel syntactic, semantic and prosodic structures.

Here are some other examples of intertextuality from newspaper headlines:

**Merkel is no Bond Girl**
(German leader Angela Merkel says that she will not support the issuance of Eurobonds; intertext: James Bond movies, each of which features a ‘Bond girl’)

**American Airlines is Terminal**
(The airline is on the verge of bankruptcy; intertext: aircraft operate out of terminals)

**It’s Acropolis Now, Greece!**
(Greece is on the verge of bankruptcy; intertext: the Vietnam War film *Apocalypse Now*! directed by Francis Ford Coppola)

Implicit intertextuality is intrinsic to poetry. Many, if not most, poems can be related to other poems or works of art. Much English poetry, for example, employs imagery which has its roots in the St James’s Bible. In her poetic novel, *The Waves*, the English writer, Virginia Woolf, uses intertextuality to recast the opening of the first line of the Gospel of St John in the Bible. St John’s Gospel begins with ‘In the beginning there was the word’, while Woolf begins *The Waves* with ‘In the beginning, there was a nursery, with windows opening on to a garden, and beyond that the sea.’

Intertextuality is a major obstacle to effective communication in a foreign or second language, because it depends very much on background knowledge, which is often very culturally specific.

### 1.9 DISCOURSE AND COMMUNICATION

It should already be clear from the above discussion that Discourse Studies have a lot to offer to those concerned with Language Education, whether in the mother tongue or as a second or foreign language. In this section and in those that follow, we will consider the relationship between discourse and Language Education more explicitly. In the foregoing, we have used the terms communicative and communication a number of times. That is because discourse is the vehicle by means of which communication takes place. A traditional, although now largely discredited (by linguists, at any rate), model of communication is the so-called code model, or conduit metaphor model, as shown in Figure 1.1 (Reddy, 1979; Sperber & Wilson, 1995).

According to this model of communication, which has existed in various forms for hundreds,
if not thousands, of years, the sender encodes a message which passes along the communication channel in the form of a signal, which is then decoded by the receiver. Provided that there is no deficiency in the channel and that both sender and receiver are using the same code, successful communication is guaranteed. According to this model, communication can take place without any reference to the speaker, hearer or wider context. However, this is to leave out the important dimension of context, as discussed in section 1.7. Our interpretation of a message is affected by the context in which it is sent.

According to more recent models of communication, referred to as inferential models, speakers take into account the context and what they understand to be the background and world knowledge of their addressees. Speakers are then able to calibrate what they say to match up with this assumed hearer knowledge. They do not need to say everything, but can rely on their addressees to fill in any details that are not explicitly communicated.

To give an example, at the time of writing, the British television personality, Jeremy Clarkson, who is best known for his BBC programme, *Top Gear* (which is about cars), was interviewed on a television chat show. He was asked about an industrial strike that was disrupting the country and replied: ‘I would have them [the strikers] all shot. I would take them outside and execute them in front of their families’. If this statement was interpreted according to the code model, it would be taken literally, that this is really what Clarkson wanted to happen. As Clarkson commented in a public apology later, however, it was said for ‘comic effect’. Clarkson intended his audience to go further in their interpretation than the literal meaning of his statement and to assume that he did not mean what he said to be taken literally. Unfortunately for Clarkson, however, some members of the British public took his remarks at face value and accused him of offensive behaviour, thereby illustrating how verbal communication is not always successful, as suggested by the code model, and can sometimes lead to misunderstanding.

### 1.10 DISCOURSE AND COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

Language educators are concerned with encouraging learners to communicate in the most effective ways possible. It is self-evident, therefore, that an understanding of discourse and its role in communication will be of value to such students or professionals.

In the 1960s, the leading theory of language was that of Chomsky (1965), who made a famous distinction between competence and performance: competence, referring to the underlying grammatical system that he claimed to be intuitively known by all native speakers of a language and performance, referring to actual language use in real situations. Chomsky was only interested in competence, viewing performance – which incorporated memory limitations, distractions and slips of the tongue – as a distortion of the ideal model that is competence.

In reaction to Chomsky, Hymes (1972b) argued that there was more to language than idealised grammar, invoking the term communicative competence to refer to the competence that is required in real communication. Language use was also worthy of study and had its own (situationally
defined) conventions and patterns, according to Hymes. His famous dictum was ‘there are rules of use without which the rules of grammar would be useless’ (1972b: 278). To investigate these situationally defined conventions and patterns, Hymes developed his model of contextual variables, referred to above in section 1.7.

Hymes’s ideas on communicative competence were taken up by applied linguists, who recontextualised (appropriated from one field to another) his theory (Leung, 2005) as a goal for teaching and learning, in what became known as the communicative approach to language teaching (CLT). As Dubin (cited in Leung, 2005: 124) has noted, these applied linguists shifted Hymes’s agenda away from researching what was happening in language communities to a set of standards for an ideal teaching and learning curriculum. Nevertheless, in spite of this shift in orientation, with the notion of communicative competence acting as what Leung has referred to as its ‘intellectual anchor’, CLT rapidly became the predominant paradigm for language development internationally and has remained so up to the present.

The most commonly cited model of communicative competence in language teaching is that of Canale and Swain (1980), who broke communicative competence down into three subcomponents:

1. **Grammatical competence**: knowledge and skill with regard to lexical items and rules of morphology, syntax, sentence grammar semantics and phonology.
2. **Sociolinguistic competence**: Hymes’s rules of use; knowledge and skill regarding formality, politeness and appropriateness of meaning to situation.
3. **Strategic competence**: strategies to compensate for breakdowns in communication and to enhance language learning.

Later, Canale (1983) added a fourth component, discourse competence, which referred to the knowledge of and skill in combining linguistic elements to achieve a unified textual whole. A problem with adding this extra component, however, is that it seems to be at a different level; it would seem that grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence and strategic competence are all component parts of overall discourse competence. Realising this, Celce-Murcia (2007) has put forward a more complex, but better integrated, model of communicative competence, which highlights this central role for discourse competence. Celce-Murcia’s revised model is shown in Figure 1.2.

In the model, sociocultural competence refers to the speaker’s pragmatic knowledge, that is to say, Hymes’s rules of speaking; it includes social contextual factors, such as the participants’ age, gender and status; stylistic appropriateness, such as politeness strategies; and cultural factors, including background knowledge about the target language group.

**Linguistic competence** is equivalent to Canale and Swain’s grammatical competence.

**Formulaic competence** is the counterpart to linguistic competence; it refers to the fixed, prefabricated chunks of language which do not behave in the generative way that grammatical items do. This will be dealt with in Chapter 9, when we discuss corpus approaches to discourse.

**Interactional competence** includes actional competence (the ability to perform speech acts: see Chapter 5) and conversational competence (the ability to operate the turn-taking system of conversation: see Chapter 7).

**Strategic competence** consists of strategies for language learning or maintaining the flow of interaction; it is similar to Canale and Swain’s original strategic competence component. This component is represented in Figure 1.2 as going around and linking up the other components, because it allows for the resolution of ambiguities and deficiencies in these other parts of the model.

**Discourse competence**, in Celce-Murcia’s model, plays a central, controlling role; it ‘refers to the selection, sequencing and arrangement of words, structures, and utterances to achieve a unified spoken message’ (Celce-Murcia, 2007: 46). This is where the other elements in the model come together; where the lexical and linguistic levels, the formulaic patterns and the sociocultural and
interactional knowledge are united in the creation of coherent text. Discourse competence is thus a level above the other subcompetencies in Celce-Murcia’s model, a level which both incorporates and controls all of the other elements.

With Celce-Murcia, we should stress that the model should be viewed not as a static product, as might be suggested by Figure 1.2, but as a dynamic process, with a constant interaction of the component parts.

1.11 ORGANISATION OF THE BOOK

One of the challenges for anyone entering the field of Discourse Studies is the plethora of different features of discourse to focus upon, on the one hand, and the abundance of theoretical and methodological approaches, on the other. The solution offered to this problem in this book is to organise the chapters according to specific approaches or areas within Discourse Studies which are judged to be of particular relevance to Language Education and to allow the reader to decide which might be of most value. At the same time, it is worth noting that Discourse Analysis is becoming more and more eclectic and approaches and methods are increasingly being combined. The book does not argue for any one particular view, although astute readers may be able to note some of the author’s preferences in the way that the chapters have been selected and written.

The topics of the individual chapters are as follows: Chapter 2 deals with the Systemic Functional Linguistics approach to discourse and the theory of register, how language varies systematically according to situation. Chapter 3 focuses on cohesion, the linguistic features which hold texts together. Chapter 4 is also concerned with how a text coheres, but here, not in terms of formal links, but rather of the thematic development of a text, how the organisation of the information in the clauses that make up a text functions to make the text hold together. In Chapters 5–6 the focus changes to consider features of discourse dealt with in the field know as Pragmatics, namely speech act theory (Chapter 5), how language is used to perform communicative actions, and the Cooperative Principle and Politeness (Chapter 6), two pragmatic phenomena which guide cooperative
communicative behaviour. In Chapter 7, we overview the approach to discourse known as *Conversation Analysis*, which looks at the structures which create order in conversation and other forms of spoken interaction. Chapter 8 introduces the concept of *genre*, the staged, goal-oriented activities shared by particular communities. Chapter 9 deals with computer-assisted approaches to the analysis of discourse, as embodied in the field known as *Corpus Linguistics*. Chapter 10 centres on a particular approach to Discourse Analysis, *Critical Discourse Analysis*, which views language as a form of social practice and looks for structures of power, manipulation and control in discourse.

Each chapter follows a fairly systematic organisation, beginning with the introduction of key concepts and questions in the field and discussion of their relevance to Language Education, reviewing the key literature to exemplify the concepts and questions (sometimes from my own work), sometimes introducing original textual analysis to illustrate key issues, and concluding with sections devoted to critiques of the approaches described, and implications for application to pedagogy. In selecting the literature to review, attention has been paid to ensuring that the seminal publications are included, as well as more recent work.

### 1.12 QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What are some of the ‘big D’ discourses you come into contact with on a daily basis? What are their distinctive features? What are the ideas and attitudes they express? Can you think of any particular linguistic features of these discourses?
2. Think of someone you know. How do they identify themselves through their use of language, perhaps because of their age, their job, or some other contextual factors?
3. Can you think of (or make up) any examples of intertextuality, maybe in newspaper headlines or advertisements you have come across?
4. Can you think of any examples of intertextuality that would be difficult for a foreigner entering your country or an English-speaking country you are familiar with?
5. Why do you think the conduit model has remained so popular over the centuries?
6. Do you think non-native speakers can acquire the same level of linguistic competence as posited by Chomsky for native speakers?
7. Do you think non-native speakers can acquire the same level of communicative competence as posited by Hymes for native speakers?
8. Which do you think is more important in learning a language: linguistic (grammatical) competence or communicative competence?
9. Can you think of any ‘rules of use’, as referred to by Hymes? Think of a particular context, such as the classroom, the library, a particular type of shop or a bank.
10. Are you familiar with any strategies that you (or others) use as part of your strategic competence when you speak a second/foreign language?
11. What do you think about Celce-Murcia’s model of communicative competence? What are its strengths and weaknesses?

### 1.13 FURTHER READING