

6 Language and discourse

6.1 Discourse variation

Whatever the structures we use, and whatever the uses we employ, the end of language is to engage in discourse, in which all aspects of structure combine to produce monologues or dialogues in real situations. All roads lead to discourse, as shown in the diagram. Discourse here is used in its broadest sense, applying to speech as well as writing. Some give the term *text* a similarly broad application, and talk about textlinguistics where others talk about discourse analysis. The emphasis is different, but the intent is the same: to move away from the analysis of individual words and sentences to the realities of monologue and dialogue in any mode of transmission.

The monologue/dialogue distinction introduces a different kind of classification from what we have seen above. Under the heading of monologue, we include such varieties as lectures, speeches, commentaries, sermons and legal submissions. Under dialogue, we find such varieties as interviews, council meetings, phone-ins, tutorials, and (the norm) everyday conversation. Each raises interesting points of detail, such as the use of comment clauses in conversation. Items such as *you know* are more subtle than is acknowledged by popular opinion.

What factors help shape a discourse? Most obviously, the number of participants and the relationship that exists between them. This will condition, for example, the formality level of the interaction, as well many specific features, such as terms of address and use of taboo words. Awareness of audience is a specific concern in movements such as the Plain English Campaign and the notion of political correctness.

Discourse characteristics will also be shaped by psychological and educational factors. Chief among psychological factors is personality, which includes our individual likes and dislikes. For example, some emailers are cavalier in their use of punctuation, capitalization and spelling; others are strict in following traditional

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convention. Aesthetic factors are important too, such as when choosing fonts for a web design.

Educative factors include the way we have been taught about language, which includes opportunities to be literate, the kind of teaching materials we were given, and the attitudes we assimilated from our teachers, especially the level of their prescriptivism (caring or not caring about such matters as split infinitives or sentence-initial *And*).

An analogy with clothing can help us understand the notion of discourse competence. If we have a range of dress options in our wardrobe, we are in a position to choose appropriate clothing to suit the social circumstances in which we find ourselves. Similarly, if we have a range of linguistic options in our brains, we are in a position to choose appropriate language (ie languages, dialects, varieties and styles) to suit the social circumstances in which we find ourselves. The primary aim of language teaching in education, in my view, is to develop young people's sense of linguistic appropriateness so that they develop an informed control of their own use of language and a critical appreciation of the language of others. This is studied by educational linguistics.

6.2 New discourses

All roads lead to discourse, and a language is always extending its wardrobe of discourses, as can be seen in the evolution of a language in speech, writing, print, telephony, broadcasting and the Internet. Each stage introduces new discourses related to the opportunities introduced by new technology. Novel constraints will produce innovation, as seen vividly in text-messaging and tweeting. *Twitter* well illustrates how unpredictable and fast-moving discourse variation can be.

Thanks to electronic technology, we are living through a period of remarkable discourse innovation, as seen in the range of outputs (web, chat, blog, etc) which have become commonplace since 1990. Anonymous contributions motivate a different kind of language from signed ones. Single authorship is replaced by multiple authorship in wikis, resulting in an unprecedented level of stylistic heterogeneity.

Electronically mediated communication has also motivated new forms of linguistic creativity, such as text-messaging poems and novels. The medium offers a fresh literary experience as a poem or story unfolds on screen. We cannot see the whole text on a mobile phone screen, for example, so poem length is an ongoing discovery and prose reading on iPads and Kindles motivates less skimming.

A comparative discourse analysis is still in its infancy, but it is important to adopt a broad linguistic perspective, studying as many languages as possible. How do languages adapt to electronic communication (eg using similar text-messaging strategies)? Professional translators know that there are many differences in approach and tone when translating texts (eg humour often does not travel). Languages vary in their use of puns, first-person narrative, and so on.

The diagram which accompanies this series is comprehensive. It is possible to locate any topic of linguistic enquiry within its scope, though you may often have to 'translate' your own terminology first (eg if you use the term *register* where I use *variety*). The approach can be used as an end in itself (linguistics) or as a means to some other end (applied linguistics). Applied linguistics is the application of linguistic

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theories, methods and findings to the solution of problems in areas of society where language plays an important part, such as language learning and teaching, translating and interpreting, and speech disability. Here, too, new domains emerge: an applied Internet linguistics, for example, can enhance commercial activity (as in making ads appropriate to web page content).

Ultimately, whether our interest is pure or applied, the aim is to master the subject of language. It is Lewis Carroll's conclusion too, when Alice meets Humpty Dumpty in *Through the Looking Glass*:

'When I use a word,' Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, 'it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less.'

'The question is,' said Alice, 'whether you *can* make a word mean so many different things.'

'The question is,' said Humpty Dumpty, 'which is to be master – that's all.'