

Text and Discourse. Preliminary Remarks

The term 'discourse' has become common currency in a variety of disciplines: critical theory, sociology, linguistics, philosophy, social psychology and many other fields, so much so that it is frequently left undefined, as if its usage was simply common knowledge. It is used widely in analysing literary and non-literary texts and it is often employed to signal a certain theoretical sophistication in ways which are vague and sometimes obfuscatory.¹ It has perhaps the widest range of possible significations of any term in literary and cultural theory and yet it is often the term within theoretical texts which is least defined. It is interesting therefore to trace the ways in which we try to make sense of the term. The most obvious way to track down its range of meanings is through consulting a dictionary, but here the more general meanings of the term and its more theoretical usages seem to have become enmeshed², since the theoretical meanings always have an overlaying of the more general meanings. The history of the development of the general use of the term has been chequered; if we take even the simplest route through its history we can see a shifting from the highlighting of one aspect of usage to another:

discourse: 1. verbal communication; talk, conversation; 2. a formal treatment of a subject in speech or writing; 3. a unit of text used by linguists for the analysis of linguistic phenomena that range over more than one sentence; 4. to discourse: the ability to reason (archaic); 5. to discourse on/upon: to speak or write about formally; 6. to hold a discussion; 7. to give forth (music) (archaic). (14th century, from Medieval Latin. *discursus*: argument, from Latin, a running to and fro *discurrere*)

(Collins Concise English Dictionary, 1988)

discourse: 1. a conversation, especially of a formal nature; formal and orderly expression of ideas in speech or writing; also such expression in the form of a sermon, treatise, etc.; a piece or unit of connected speech or writing. (Middle English: *discours*, from Latin: act of running about)

(Longman Dictionary of the English Language, 1984)

This sense in the general usage of discourse as having to do with conversation and 'holding forth' on a subject, or giving a speech, has been due to the etymology of the word. However, it has also been due to the fact that this is the core meaning of the term *discours* in French, and since the 1960s has been a word associated with French philosophical thought, even though the terms *discours* and discourse do not correspond to one another exactly. Thus a French/English dictionary gives us: **discours:** a) speech; **tous ces beaux discours:** all this fine talk (pejorative); **suis moi sans faire de discours:** follow me and no arguing! **perdre son temps en discours:** to waste one's time talking; b) **discours direct/indirect:** direct/indirect speech (linguistics); c) **discours:** (philosophical treatise); **discourir:** faire un discours: to discourse; to hold forth upon; to chat (pejorative).

(Collins Robert Concise French Dictionary, 1990)

During the 1960s the general meaning of the term, its philosophical meaning and a new set of more theoretical meanings began to diverge slightly, but these more general meanings have always been kept in play, inflecting the theoretical meanings in particular ways. Within the theoretical range of meanings, it is difficult to know where or how to track down the meaning of the term discourse. Glossaries of theoretical terms are sometimes of help, but very often the disciplinary context in which the term occurs is more important in trying to determine which of these meanings is being brought into play. We will try to map out the theoretical contexts

¹ To obfuscate – to confuse, bewilder or stupefy

² To enmesh – to entangle, involve, or catch, as in a net

within which the term discourse is used, in order to narrow down the range of possible meanings. It is largely the constraints created by academic disciplinary boundaries which demarcate the various meanings of the term: when linguists talk of a 'discourse of advertising', they are clearly referring to something quite different to a social psychologist who talks of a 'discourse of racism'. Yet, even within a particular discipline, there is a great deal of fluidity in the range of reference of the term discourse. Consider, for example, David Crystal's³ attempt to pin down the meaning of 'discourse' within linguistics, by contrasting it to the use of the term 'text':

Discourse analysis focusses on the structure of naturally occurring spoken language, as found in such 'discourses' as conversations, interviews, commentaries and speeches. Text analysis focusses on the structure of written language, as found in such 'texts' as essays, notices, road signs and chapters. But this distinction is not clear-cut, and there have been many other uses of these labels. In particular, 'discourse' and 'text' can be used in a much broader sense to include *all* language units with a definable communicative function, whether spoken or written. Some scholars talk about 'spoken or written discourse', others about 'spoken or written text' (Crystal, 1987:116; emphasis in original)

Discourse, like any other term, is also largely defined by what it is not, what it is set in opposition to; thus, discourse is often characterised by its difference from a series of terms, such as text, sentence and ideology—each of these oppositional terms marks out the meaning of discourse. For example, Geoffrey Leech⁴ and Michael Short argue that:

Discourse is linguistic communication seen as a transaction between speaker and hearer, as an interpersonal activity whose form is determined by its social purpose. Text is linguistic communication (either spoken or written) seen simply as a message coded in its auditory or visual medium. (cited in Hawthorn, 1992:189)

And Hawthorn himself comments on this opposition between text and discourse:

Michael Stubbs (1983) treats text and discourse as more or less synonymous, but notes that in other usages a text may be written, while a discourse is spoken, a text may be non-interactive whereas a discourse is interactive...a text may be short or long whereas a discourse implies a certain length, and a text must be possessed of surface cohesion whereas a discourse must be possessed of a deeper coherence. Finally, Stubbs notes that other theorists distinguish between abstract theoretical construct and pragmatic realization, although, confusingly, such theorists are not agreed upon which of these is represented by the term text.

(Hawthorn, 1992:189)

Emile Benveniste contrasts discourse with 'the language system', when he states:

The sentence, an undefined creation of limitless variety, is the very life of human speech in action. We conclude from this that with the sentence we leave the domain of language as a system of signs and enter into another universe, that of language as an instrument of communication, whose expression is discourse. (Benveniste, 1971:110)

³ David Crystal (born 1941) – linguist, academic and author

⁴ Geoffrey Leech – Professor of Linguistics and Modern English Language at Lancaster University (Leech and Short, authors of *Style in Fiction*)

He thus characterises discourse as the domain of communication, but goes on to contrast discourse with history, or story (*histoire*), which is a distinction more finely developed in French than in English, because of the use of different past tenses for formally narrating events and representing events within a spoken frame of reference:

Discourse must be understood in its widest sense: every utterance assumes a speaker and a hearer, and in the speaker, the intention of influencing the other in some way.... It is every variety of oral discourse of every nature from trivial conversation to the most elaborate oration...but it is also the mass of writing that reproduces oral discourse or that borrows its manner of expression and its purposes: correspondence, memoirs, plays, didactic works, in short, all genres in which someone addresses [themselves] as the speaker, and organises what [they say] in the category of person. The distinction we are making between historical narration and discourse does not at all coincide with that between written language and the spoken. Historical utterance is today reserved for the written language, but discourse is written as well as spoken. In practice, one passes from one to the other instantaneously. Each time that discourse appears in the midst of historical narration, for example, when the historian reproduces someone's words or when [they themselves intervene] in order to comment upon the events reported, we pass to another tense system, that of discourse. (ibid.: 208-9)

Because this seems to be such a specific use of the term, many theorists sometimes prefer to retain the French usage, *histoire/discours*, rather than using the English words.

Some theorists contrast discourse with ideology; for example, Roger Fowler⁵ states:

'Discourse' is speech or writing seen from the point of view of the beliefs, values and categories which it embodies; these beliefs etc. constitute a way of looking at the world, an organization or representation of experience-'ideology' in the neutral non-pejorative sense. Different modes of discourse encode different representations of experience; and the source of these representations is the communicative context within which the discourse is embedded. (cited in Hawthorn, 1992:48)

Thus, when we try to define discourse, we may resort to referring to dictionaries, to the disciplinary context of the utterance or to terms which are used in contrast to discourse, even though none of these strategies produces a simple, clear meaning of the term, but rather only serves to show us the fluidity of its meaning. In order to try to introduce some clarity into the definition of the term, this introduction aims to provide some fairly straightforward working definitions, as they are currently used within different disciplines. However, discourse, as will be readily observed, cannot be pinned down to one meaning, since it has had a complex history and it is used in a range of different ways by different theorists, and sometimes even by the same theorist. As Michel Foucault⁶ comments:

Instead of gradually reducing the rather fluctuating meaning of the word 'discourse', I believe I have in fact added to its meanings: treating it sometimes as the general domain of all statements, sometimes as an individualizable group of statements, and sometimes as a regulated practice that accounts for a number of statements. (Foucault, 1972:80)

If we analyse this quotation a little, we will be able to isolate the range of meanings that the term discourse has accrued to itself within Foucault's work. The first definition that Foucault gives is the widest one: 'the general domain of all statements'; that is, all utterances or texts

⁵ Roger Fowler – Professor of English and Linguistics in the School of Modern languages and European Studies, University of East Anglia

⁶ Michel Foucault – French philosopher, historian, intellectual, critic and sociologist

which have meaning and which have some effects in the real world, count as discourse. This is a broad definition and is generally used by Foucault in this way, particularly in his earlier more structuralist work, when he is discussing the concept of discourse at a theoretical level. It may be useful to consider this usage to be more about discourse in general than about a discourse or discourses, with which the second and third definitions are concerned. The second definition that he gives-'an individualizable group of statements'-is one which is used more often by Foucault when he is discussing the particular structures within discourse; thus, he is concerned to be able to identify discourses, that is groups of utterances which seem to be regulated in some way and which seem to have a coherence and a force to them in common. Within this definition, therefore, it would be possible to talk about a discourse of femininity, a discourse of imperialism, and so on. Foucault's third definition of discourse is perhaps the one which has most resonance for many theorists: 'a regulated practice which accounts for a number of statements'. We can take this to mean that, here, he is interested less in the actual utterances/texts that are produced than in the rules and structures which produce particular utterances and texts. It is this rule-governed nature of discourse that is of primary importance within this definition. Within most discourse theorists' work, these definitions are used almost interchangeably and one can be overlaid on the other.

To make matters even more complex, while Foucault's definitions of discourse have been extremely influential within cultural theory in general, he is by no means the only theorist to use the term, and other definitions of discourse often became enmeshed in the general meanings of the term. For example, Mikhail Bakhtin⁷ sometimes uses discourse to signify either a voice (as in double-voiced discourse) or a method of using words which presumes authority (this usage is influenced by the meaning of the Russian word for discourse, *slovo*) (Hawthorn, 1992:48). Within structuralist and post-structuralist theory, the use of the term discourse signalled a major break with previous views of language and representation. Rather than seeing language as simply expressive, as transparent, as a vehicle of communication, as a form of representation, structuralist theorists and in turn post-structuralists saw language as a system with its own rules and constraints, and with its own determining effect on the way that individuals think and express themselves. The use of the term discourse, perhaps more than any other term, signals this break with past views of language. What makes the process of defining discourse even more complex is that most theorists when using the term do not specify which of these particular meanings they are using. Furthermore, most theorists, modify even these basic definitions. What is necessary is to be able to decide in which context the term is being used, and hence what meanings have accrued to it.

CULTURAL THEORY/CRITICAL THEORY/LITERARY THEORY Influenced largely by Foucault's work, within cultural theory as a whole, discourse is often used in an amalgam of the meanings derived from the term's Latin and French origins and influences (*a speech/conversation*) and a more specific theoretical meaning which sees discourse as the general domain of the production and circulation of rule-governed statements. A distinction may be usefully made between this general, abstract theoretical concern with *discourse* and the analysis of individual *discourses*, or groupings of statements produced within power relations. In Mikhail Bakhtin's work, and also in Roland Barthes' work, however, a discourse can be taken to

⁷ Mikhail Bakhtin (1926-1984) – Russian philosopher, literary critic, semiotician and scholar, who wrote significant works of literary and rhetorical theory and criticism.

represent a voice within a text or a speech position. For theorists such as Emile Benveniste, discourse is the representation of events in a text without particular concern for their chronology in real- time (*histoire/story*).

LINGUISTICS

For many theorists within mainstream⁸ linguistics, the term discourse signifies a turning away from sentences as exemplars of usage in the abstract, that is examples of the way that language is structured as a system, to a concern with language in use. For others, discourse implies a concern with the analysis of the text above the level of the utterance or sentence; thus, discourse is an extended piece of text, which has some form of internal organisation, coherence or cohesion. For other linguists, discourse is defined by the context of occurrence of certain utterances (thus, the discourse of religion, the discourse of advertising). These contexts of production of texts will determine the internal constituents of the specific texts produced.

SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY/CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

For social psychologists and Critical Discourse analysts, discourse is used in a variety of ways, but all of them fuse meanings derived from linguistics and cultural theory. Thus, social psychologists tend to integrate a concern with power relations and the resultant structures of authorised utterances, such as racism or sexism, with a methodology derived from discourse analysis and conversation analysis. Critical Discourse analysts such as Norman Fairclough, Ruth Wodak and Joanna Thornborrow have tended to be similarly concerned with power relations and the way these shape the production of utterances and texts, but their methodology has been influenced by linguistics and cultural theory, and they are thus able to provide a more complex model of the way that discourse functions, and the effects that it has on participants. This fusion of linguistics and cultural theory has inevitably resulted in an overlaying of the meanings of discourse from both fields.

CULTURAL THEORY AND MODELS OF DISCOURSE

Whilst Michel Foucault⁹ is one of the theorists most often referred to when discussing the term discourse, there are a number of other theorists whose work on discourse is important. Macdonnell¹⁰ discusses in detail the differences between the definitions developed by Michel Foucault, Barry Hindess¹¹ and Paul Hirst¹², Louis Althusser¹³ and Valentin Voloshinov¹⁴/Mikhail Bakhtin¹⁵. She concludes that it is the institutional nature of discourse and its situatedness in the social which is central to all of these different perspectives. She states: 'dialogue is the primary condition of discourse; all speech and writing is social'; and she goes on to say: 'discourses differ with the kinds of institutions and social practices in which they take shape and with the positions of those who speak and those whom they address'(Macdonnell, 1986:1). Thus, a discourse is not

⁸ Mainstream (adj.) – belonging to, or characteristic of a principal, dominant or widely accepted group, movement, style, etc.

⁹ Michael Foucault, author of *Nașterea clinicii* (1963), *Cuvintele și lucrurile* (1966), *Arheologia cunoașterii* (1968), *Ordinea discursului* (1971), *A supraveghea și a pedepsi* (1975), *Voința de a ști* (1976)

¹⁰ Macdonnell, D. (1987) *Theories of Discourse: An Introduction*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford

¹¹ Barry Hindess – Professor of Political Science in the Research School of Social Sciences at the Australian National University. He has published widely in the areas of social and political theory.

¹² Paul Hirst – British sociologist, Professor of social theory at Birkbeck, University of London

¹³ Louis Althusser – Marxist philosopher, Professor of philosophy at Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris

¹⁴ Valentin Voloshinov – Russian linguist whose work has been influential in the fields of literary theory and Marxist theory of ideology

¹⁵ Mikhail Bakhtin – Russian philosopher, literary critic, semiotician and scholar, who wrote significant works of literary and rhetorical theory and criticism.

a disembodied collection of statements, but groupings of utterances or sentences, statements which are enacted within a social context, which are determined by that social context and which contribute to the way that social context continues its existence. Institutions and social context therefore play an important determining role in the development, maintenance and circulation of discourses. This institutional nature of discourse is particularly notable in the work of Michel Pecheux¹⁶, and in discussing his theorising of discourse, Macdonnell comments:

A 'discourse' as a particular area of language use may be identified by the institutions to which it relates and by the positions from which it comes and which it marks out for the speaker. The position does not exist by itself, however. Indeed, it may be understood as a standpoint taken up by the discourse through its relation to another, ultimately an opposing discourse. (ibid.: 3)

Thus, particularly in Pecheux's work, discourses (here, groups of utterances/texts which have similar force or effect) do not occur in isolation but in dialogue, in relation to or, more often, in contrast and opposition to other groups of utterances. A simple example of this is the way that the discourse of environmentalism has been structured in reaction to government economic and strategic development policies, and also in reaction to ecological disasters. In this sense, the form that environmental philosophies have developed has depended in a large measure on events and discursive frameworks external to it. However, it could equally be argued that government policy is framed precisely in reaction to pressure groups such as environmental groups. Thus, environmental groups such as Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth have in recent years begun to present their work more in the style of government or scientific reports and have moved away from their more politically motivated informal style; the government has adopted a more environmentally friendly position on the environment and hence a lexicon which is borrowed almost wholesale from environmental groups in order to position itself favourably with the electorate. Therefore, each group will have its discursive parameters defined for it in part by the other.

A further aspect which all these views of discourse have in common is that they consider discourses to be principally organised around practices of exclusion. Whilst what it is possible to say seems self-evident and natural, this naturalness is a result of what has been excluded, that which is almost unsayable. Thus, for example, it seems self-evident that we should talk about menstruation in negative terms, describing it in terms analogous to imprisonment and cloaking it in secrecy. One has only to look at advertisements for tampons and sanitary towels to feel this discursive pressure, which seem either to discuss menstruation in terms of freedom or discretion, assuming that there is something about menstruation that one would want to hide. This feels fairly uncontroversial, since many Western women experience menstruation as a burden, as painful and as limiting their normal lives; but the fact that some women's experience ties in with or is conditioned by discursive pressure does not mean that it has some authentic or real existence. This particular view of menstruation and the experience of menstruation is made possible by the fact that other ways of knowing about menstruation have been excluded. This way of looking at the functioning of women's bodies can be seen to be part of a medicalised discourse of women's health, which categorises such events as childbirth and menstruation as pathological in relation to a perceived male norm (Shuttle and Redgrove, 1978). This is not to suggest, that women should therefore celebrate menstruation, but rather to call for a recognition of the excluding of any positive appraisal of the way women's bodies function. What feminist theorists have attempted to do in recent years is to question the naturalisation of these dominant

¹⁶ Michel Pecheux – French philosopher, follower of Louis Althusser, he was a leading French contributor to discourse analysis

discursive structures within which women's health is discussed in order to make those excluded discursive positions available and to gain credence for them.

A further factor which Macdonnell isolates as pertaining to all definitions of discourse is that 'whatever signifies or has meaning can be considered part of discourse'(Macdonnell, 1986:4). Whilst this may be seen by some as being too wide a definition of discourse, it does emphasise the fact that discourses are not simple groupings of utterances or statements, but consist of utterances which have meaning, force and effect within a social context. Statements-the most fundamental building blocks of discourse-are those utterances or parts of text which have an effect. Statements are not the same as sentences but are those utterances which can be seen to be grouped around one particular effect. Thus, when a judge says 'I sentence you to three years imprisonment', there are a number of these effects. The judge is institutionally sanctioned, and therefore the force of her/his pronouncement is to transform the accused into a criminal and to enforce a particular sentence on that person. Thus, 'I sentence you...' can be regarded both as a statement and as part of a discourse, since such a statement can only have effect if it is uttered within the context of other utterances (i.e. if certain procedures have been adhered to) and if it takes place within an institutional setting (i.e. within a court room, by an appointed judge)..

One theorist whose work can usefully be read in conjunction with Michel Foucault's is the Marxist linguist, Michel Pecheux His work on discourse (Pecheux, 1982) is important in that he tried to analyse the meanings of words and their relations to larger structures without assuming that words and sentences had a fixed meaning in themselves. He conducted an experiment, later termed the 'Mansholt report', whereby he gave students an economics text to read; he told one group of students that it was a left-wing text and the other group that it was a right-wing text. The text itself could be broadly categorized as a middle-of-the-road economics text, but he showed that each group read the text selectively to fit in with the political framing that he had given it. In this sense, he gives shape to Foucault's work on discourse by providing a concrete example of the way in which larger discursive structures shape our interpretation of texts. Pecheux's work is important in that he stresses more than Foucault the conflictual nature of discourse: that it is always in dialogue and in conflict with other positions. He stresses the fact that ideological struggle is at the heart of discourse. Pecheux also makes a useful addition to thinking on discourses, since he is concerned, with questions of access; while Foucault tends to deal with a fairly stable notion of access to discourses, Pecheux is concerned that, for example, people who are not privileged within the class system, through lack of access to education, knowledge and familiarity with information networks and capital, are prevented from having easy access to discourses. Thus, although the same language may be spoken throughout a country (this itself is debatable given, for example, the multicultural and multilingual environment of Britain), there is a sense in which access to those discursive frameworks which circulate in society is not equally available to all. An example of this is the exclusions in operation with regard to who can publish in an academic journal; in theory, anyone can submit an article to an academic journal, but in practice the article will only be published if it submits to the formal rules of the discourse governing the structures contained within academic papers (i.e. it uses the vocabulary and formal language recognised as appropriate for such writing; it draws critically on other academic articles and cites recent publications by other academics; it conforms to the concerns of articles within that particular journal and uses the appropriate vocabulary associated with those concerns). However, generally there are other unspoken rules which govern whether an article is published or not, and these are related to whether the writer is employed by an educational institution, whether the writer is known to the editors or referees of

the article, and so on. Thus, while access to publishing is, apparently, open to all, in fact there are a number of discursive and institutional barriers which limit academic publishing to those people who are employed in academic posts, who know the discursive rules for writing academic articles and who are able to manipulate their own concerns in line with those discursive structures.

Discourses structure both our sense of reality and our notion of our own identity. Pecheux's work enables us to consider ways in which subjects can come to a position of disidentification, whereby we not only locate and isolate the ways in which we as subjects have been constructed and subjected, but we also map out for ourselves new terrains in which we can construct different and potentially more liberating ways in which we can exist. The Women's Movement has been important for many women in mapping out new discursive roles for both men and women. These roles are strongly contested (and affirmed and colonised) by media representations and by the representations which are constructed through people's interactions with stereotypes of all kinds. But this type of critical knowledge has fundamentally changed what it means to exist as a gendered subject. Thus, to go back to the earlier example of menstruation, it is clear that feminist writing and action on women's health has enabled menstruation to be talked about within the public domain, and even women's sanitary products to be advertised on television. Feminist reappraisals of menstruation have meant that advertising no longer only stresses imprisonment; in fact, it could be said that the pressures of feminism have resulted in the altogether surreal advertisements for such products as Bodyform and Tampax where menstruating women perform athletic acts (skydiving, swimming, surfing, pushing broken-down cars) which perhaps are not featured in other forms of advertising for products targeted at women. Thus, feminist disidentification with the dominant discourses concerned with menstruation has resulted in changes in the representation of menstruation within the public domain, and ultimately in alternative ways of considering women's health. However, in this instance, the surreal nature of the advertising concerning sanitary products does signal a singular inability to cope with the experience of menstruation-the advertisements are still concerned with the erasing of menstruation, rather than with putting forward a more positive view of periods. Thus, for **Pecheux in particular, discourses do not exist in isolation, but are the object and site of struggle. Discourses are thus not fixed but are the site of constant contestation of meaning.**