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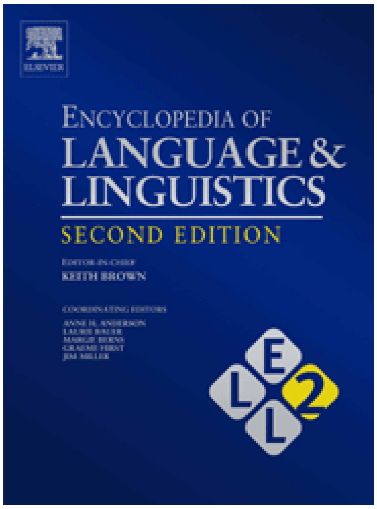

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Cultural and Social Dimension of Spoken Discourse

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'Spoken discourse' is a fancy name for the sort of language we live with in the course of ordinary life, the source from which we all acquire not only language itself but, indeed, major aspects of our social and cultural worlds. It is largely through spoken interaction with others that we learn not only what sorts of social identities there are, and how to recognize them, but in fact how to construct and present ourselves as persons. Insofar as most meaningful social action is accomplished in large part discursively, it is also through speech that we carry out much of the business of our lives.

Within linguistics, the study of discourse is frequently distinguished from other structural inquiries simply by the size and scope of the units of analysis. When one looks at linguistic entities larger than sentences, takes into consideration the organization of textual fragments, or begins to encompass turns at talk across different speakers, tools that were useful in analyzing sounds, words and their parts, or clauses become insufficient. It is in the choice of larger bodies of language, too, that the communicative traditions of specific social and cultural communities become immediately and unavoidably relevant. For what warrants selecting some particular fragment of speech as a unit in the first place? What gives it coherence and separates it from other surrounding talk?

Cultural considerations are always at work in such judgments. What makes a stretch of talk into a complete 'conversation' or 'mathematics lesson' or 'curing ceremony' or 'farewell'? Local criteria for what constitutes 'talk' in the first place can vary widely. From the beginning of anthropological attention to speech, theorists have grappled with differing notions of what is *real* talk – often highly specialized genres like prayer ('talk with God'), or denunciation and declamation in ritual or highly public settings – versus what is simply 'small talk' (gossip, a casual conversation, a greeting on the path), or not even 'talk' at all (perhaps a gesture, the babbling of an infant, the calls of animals, or the voice of the wind – for some communities real communication, if by nonhuman interactants, whereas for others even true discourse with intentional, albeit not volitional, participants).

Equally variable, then, are the sorts of participants spoken discourse admits. Discourse requires interlocutors, and these come in different flavors, not all equally endowed with voices or privileges to use them. (In some communicative traditions, 'children are to be seen and not heard'; in others, wisdom comes 'out of the mouths of babes.') Different genders, castes, classes, ages, and ethnic identities may be differentially voiced or devoiced, and the resulting discourses will be differentially marked by what have been called 'participation frames': matrices of interlocutors, with different sorts of rights and obligations for speaking, differential access to the speech of others, and different sorts of statuses – whether recognized, ratified, authoritative, or the reverse – and stances (authoritative, indifferent, oppositional, etc.) in relation to the resulting talk.

The provenance of every piece of discourse is thus some social occasion for talk, and the textual sediment of the discourse will therefore always carry traces of its sociocultural (and political and historical) origins: why people had the linguistic interchange, and what happened (to them, between them, for them) when they did. An incidental but important consequence for research on spoken discourse is thus ethical: the identities and purposes of interlocutors may require careful treatment in any empirical description or analysis, since unlike canonical sentences, rarely are discursive fragments generated in the (relatively) neutral social and political climate of elicitation or introspection.

The social character of spoken discourse is also clear in the texture of speech itself. (Aspects of the spoken medium, incidentally, have analogues in other linguistic modalities, such as sign, a topic beyond the scope of this article.) By definition we think of the medium as verbalization – spoken words – but other sorts of signals are routinely involved. Spoken discourse routinely includes vocal sounds other than phonation, voice qualities, nonspeech vocalizations (e.g., sighs, laughs, grunts), and other noises, which may have local and partly conventionalized import (a finger snap, a clap, a stomp, a slap, even a slammed door, a tapping pencil, or a spoon on a glass). Moreover, gestures and in general motions and attitudes of the body – themselves subject to cultural shaping (think of a nod, a bow, a wink, or a shrug) and to ideological shading ('it's not polite to point') – may form a central part of interaction, coordinating the

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discourse itself or complementing other signaling modalities. The popular idea that one can tell where people are from or who they are by watching them interact – whether true or not – confirms how folk linguistics understands that discursive *styles* are cultural products.

Discourse is intrinsically four-dimensional, unfolding in both space and time in a way that defies the often linear idealizations of linguistic analysis at the clause level. Discourse is also typically both polyphonic and polyvocal, combining multiple voices sometimes simultaneously and sometimes in orchestrated and partially overlapping sequences. Both aspects of spoken discourse are complicated by the sociocultural matrix in which it is produced.

Because it always unfolds in space and typically involves multiple participants, discourse can be structured in part by how interactants are arranged: how they stand or sit with respect to one another, how they are distributed in the physical environment, how they orient themselves to one another, and what sort of access (visual and aural, if not tactile and olfactory as well) they have both to other interactants and to other entities in the surrounding environment. Cultural structuring of space is thus the fundamental grounding of the resulting talk.

More insistent still is temporal structure in discourse, which always emerges as sequences of smaller linguistic units. When there are multiple interlocutors, units can overlap, be truncated, or abort prematurely. Sequences can stop and restart or can embed themselves within one another. There can be gaps, long or short. Generally time is the platform for speech, so that interlocutors can play with rhythm, synchrony, and asynchrony. Differences in temporal styles, then, can also emerge, distinguishing cultures, event or activity types, and individuals, often with value judgments and cultural stereotypes attached ('fast talkers' do not simply talk fast).

The four-dimensionality of spoken discourse merges most directly with its sociocultural underpinnings in the turn-taking system. Because there can be competition for discursive resources – the 'floor' (or its avoidance, through reticence or silence); the topic, the story line, or the punch line; authority and responsibility (and their ducking or shirking) – speaking is always a matter of politics, though the power involved may be microscopic and subtle. Who gets turns, who takes turns, and who is denied turns – and how these turns are shaped – are thus always matters of social import. Society also defines who (and what) can be addressed, who can hear, and who must not. Accordingly, there are miniature social and political structures implicit in different systems of turn allocation (contrast a courtroom or a barroom with a classroom or a locker room).

Structures of participation in spoken discourse have a further sociopolitical dimension, in that interlocutors never interact in a biographical vacuum. Their identities and personal histories, to a greater or lesser extent, public and shared between interactants, shape their talk as well as talk directed to them or around them. Some discourse theory concentrates on the mutual building of 'common ground,' or shared knowledge, between interactants in talk, but discourse begins with most shared belief already in place, legislated by prior experience (centrally including prior discourse). The sometimes covert sociopolitical structure also gives rise to 'recipient design': the fact, noted long ago by Bakhtin, that discursive 'moves' – turns at talk – are specifically tailored, in the moment, both to the purposes at hand and to the specific social personae present. Not only 'semantic' content but everything from syntax and lexicon to accent and eye gaze is part of the 'design' of talk in relation to its socially constituted targets.

There are processing consequences of the sociocultural embedding of discourse, also a product of temporality overlain by participation structures. For some theorists (Clark (1996), for example), the hallmark of talk is that it is a prototypical joint and collaborative activity that requires coordination of various kinds between interlocutors. It cannot be done alone, and to talk at all requires participants to find ways to coordinate, often without knowing exactly what is going to happen next. Both cognitive skills – the ability to infer meaning and intention, for example – and cultural routines (various 'scripts' that allow cultural experts to anticipate what will or should come next) may be involved in producing such coordination. Nonetheless, a hallmark of spoken discourse is that it is ordinarily neither preplanned nor (except in limited ways) editable, and thus it requires interlocutors to stay on their communicative toes. It is perhaps the extemporaneous quality of much spoken discourse that makes it, in Bakhtin's (1986) terms, a primary genre, a source of raw material that other sorts of language draw upon.

Spoken discourse is usually also employed for other cultural purposes: it is part of activity. Since multiple things can be happening within a single turn (Goodwin, 1981), 'parsing' discourse is not strictly a structural matter but rather requires both interlocutors and analysts to calibrate a wider context of activity and participation with the specific internal dynamics of an utterance. Such parsing is 'online' – immediate to the context and concurrent with anything else that may be going on – so that the indexical links between whatever is happening and forms of talk (the ways that speech indicates what is happening and that action partly determines the accompanying talk) are constantly in a process of revision and update. Discursive interlocutors can start off 'doing' one thing and end up accomplishing another, with multiple other 'speech acts' flitting in between.

The fact that spoken discourse ordinarily takes place 'face-to-face' also has social consequences. Some of these stem simply from the physical presence of interactants, equipped with all their bodily trappings and sensibilities. For example, physical copresence means that corporal expressions of a cultural milieu are immediately available for discursive exploitation and incorporation. Smell and touch can be invoked as much as sound or sight, and the orientation and disposition of bodies in interaction is usually significant for discourse, signaling aspects of participation (or exclusion) and commitment to the discursive task at hand, and is sometimes itself socially regimented (the seating arrangements at a *fono*, or a dinner table). Copresence means, too, that the *absence* or withholding of explicit signals may also be communicative; silence may do social work within conversation, as can avoidance of eye contact and physical distance and withdrawal.

Similarly, speech occurs in a wider physical environment, mapped and rendered significant by cultural treatment. (Recall Goffman's (1981) example of the outrageous hat that served as direct referent to the anaphoric 'it' in 'I don't like it.') Not only may physical objects have cultural significance for discourse to feed on (the colored and significantly textured patches of ground in an archeology dig, for example), but so may the environment be populated with otherwise invisible 'cultural entities' (the space where a historical figure's house once stood, for example, serving as an invisible mnemonic sign for the person himself).

Finally, consider the cultural wrappings around both the digital and analogue signaling channels in spoken discourse. Words and morphemes in the stream of speech are of course subject to the familiar sociocultural and historical fashioning that produces any linguistic code. Additionally, culturally specific emblems – gestural holophrases – conventionally complement or substitute for speech, and these clearly differ from one speech tradition to the next. (Think of the different significance across the world of gestures with different raised fingers, for example.) Conventions of form as well as meaning apply (a 'thumbs up' gesture is not the same with any other finger or with the thumb placed slightly at an angle). Beyond the hands, there are nods, shrugs, and a variety of other conventionalized bodily signs that punctuate and modulate the ordinary linguistic channel.

However, many analogue signaling devices characterize spoken discourse, and these, too, may be subject to cultural shaping.

Discourse depends – minimally for successful reference – on indexical links between discursive elements and contextual entities. *Pointing* is a device for indexically picking out a referent in the neighborhood (variously scaled and constructed) of interlocutors, and similar semiotic processes are involved in what Clark (2003) called *placing* – manipulating or moving entities in the environment as a way of incorporating something into discourse. Cultural convention often conditions how one is to point; e.g., in many Australian languages (and probably elsewhere), referents – even imaginary ones – are carefully located in space with respect to cardinal directions or other cultural standards. Analogue indexical devices are also typically ideologically charged. There may be socially polite and impolite ways to point or to handle things – for example, to pass them from one person to another. Speech that involves such gestures inherits properties from its component communicative acts. It also draws upon cultural conventions when, for example, the formation of 'iconic' gestures draws on local standards of 'similarity.'

A further analogue signaling device prominent in spoken discourse is gaze. Where interlocutors look can show both a speaker's bid for an addressee's attention and the other's acquiescence, although here, too, cultural factors may alter both expectations (as when people 'avert their eyes' or 'cannot meet your gaze'). Gaze can also be used to signal withdrawn or withheld attention. There are often accompanying ideologies (the admonition 'Don't stare!' or the detective's assessment of a 'shifty look.')

Facial expression more generally modulates the effects of speech: imagine an ironic smile accompanying rebuke or insult, or an angry look on top of an overpolite request. In sign languages, indeed, the face is one of the major 'phonological' articulators. In the verbal medium, of course, the most obvious counterpart is the voice, the final analogue signaling device to be mentioned.

Some speech communities conventionalize affect and emotion with ways of using the voice, and local theory may speak informally of, say, an 'angry voice' or relate a certain named voice quality ('whispered' or 'hoarse') to a particular communicative intent or to certain sorts of social identities ('falsetto' voice among Maya women, or 'question intonation' as a gender stereotype). The existence of such distinguishable speech symptoms also makes possible deliberate imitation or representation. 'Voicing' a protagonist by using his or her words and also his or her voice or bodily attitudes is the stock-in-trade of discursive virtuosi, among the most characteristic and versatile of cultural experts.

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Cultural, Colonialism and Gender Oriented Approaches to Translation

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The 1990s saw an expansion of research in the field of translation studies, with some of the most exciting work following what has come to be termed the 'cultural turn.' In their preface to a collection of essays published in 1990, dealing with the role played by history and by cultural issues in general in translation practice, Bassnett and Lefevere argued that any study of translation needs to take into account the double context of both source and target cultures. (Bassnett and Lefevere, 1990). An understanding of the translation norms operating at any given moment in time needs to be contextualized, since translation always takes place in a continuum, never in a vacuum.

In order to explain changes in modes of translation and the strategies employed by translators, it is necessary to consider when and where a translation takes place, for whom it is intended, and what the processes of textual production have been. Such investigation needs to be set within an overarching frame that examines the diversity of textual and extratextual power relationships that operate in different ways, in different places, and at different times. Such power relationships are culturally determined.

The cultural turn in translation studies mirrored similar tendencies in linguistics and in literary studies. However, it is also the case that cultural questions had

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