

Article

Discourse: Concept, functions and theoretical foundations

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Abstract: This article develops a theoretically dense account of discourse as a multilevel object of linguistic, social, cognitive and institutional analysis. Discourse is treated neither as a mere sequence of sentences nor as a decorative term for communication. It is approached as a regulated field of meaning production in which texts, speakers, interpretive contexts, genres, power relations and forms of knowledge become mutually connected. The article addresses three core questions. First, what is discourse and how does it differ from text? Second, which functions does discourse perform in social life? Third, which theoretical foundations make discourse analysis a distinct research paradigm rather than a loose set of interpretive techniques? The argument draws on pragmatics, systemic-functional linguistics, Bakhtinian dialogism, Foucauldian theory, critical discourse analysis and socio-cognitive approaches. The central claim is that discourse organizes meaning through a double movement. It makes utterances intelligible inside a situation, and at the same time it stabilizes broader social classifications such as normality, expertise, identity, legitimacy and exclusion. The charts and tables are used as conceptual visualizations. They do not present survey data; they condense a theoretical coding of the literature into a form suitable for comparative reading.

Keywords: Discourse, discourse analysis, pragmatics, social practice, critical discourse analysis, power, identification, context.

1. Introduction

The problem of discourse becomes clearly visible when linguistic analysis moves beyond the boundary of the isolated sentence. A sentence may be grammatically correct, yet it remains insufficient for scholarly analysis if the speaker, the institutional setting, the intended audience, and the social consequences of the utterance are left outside consideration. A medical diagnosis, a court ruling, a news headline, and a comment in a lecture hall are not simply texts placed in different locations. They enter relatively stable regimes of speaking, listening, and evaluation.[1]

The central thesis of this article can be formulated as follows: discourse is a semiotic practice situated in a social context. It links linguistic structure with processes of interpretation and with historically formed rules that define what counts as knowledge, evidence, politeness, deviation, or expertise. This definition is broader than a purely linguistic approach. It does not, however, push language into a secondary position. On the contrary, language remains the main empirical point of entry for observing meaning, position, categorization, and institutional force.[2]

The study is organized around three questions. The first concerns how discourse can be distinguished from text without being detached from actual linguistic material. The second identifies the functions of discourse at the levels of knowledge, identification, regulation, and institutional order. The third clarifies the theoretical and methodological conditions that separate discourse analysis from impressionistic commentary.[3]

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This article is designed as a theoretical project. Even so, it has practical value. The proposed model can be used in the analysis of materials from media, law, education, politics, and scholarly communication. A certain caution is still necessary here: discourse analysis is not a ready-made key that automatically reveals a hidden truth. It is a disciplined procedure of interpretation. The researcher must state clearly the corpus selection, categories, coding decisions, and the bridge from textual evidence to social interpretation.[4]

2. Materials and Methods

The article was prepared as a theoretical-conceptual study. The materials consisted of major theoretical sources on discourse: speech act theory, pragmatics, systemic functional linguistics, dialogism, Foucauldian archaeology and genealogy, critical discourse analysis, and socio-cognitive discourse studies. The selection did not aim at encyclopedic completeness. It was directed toward covering the most important analytical layers of the concept of discourse.[5]

The Table 1. methodological procedure consisted of four stages. First, the central meaning assigned to discourse in each approach was identified. Second, these meanings were compared with categories such as text, context, interaction, knowledge, institution, power, and identification. Third, the functions of discourse were brought together into a separate typology. Finally, analytical layers suitable for doctoral research were developed.[6]

Table 1. Research design and methodological parameters.

Parameter	Content	Comment
Type of study	Theoretical-conceptual analysis	The article relies on a synthesis of theoretical literature rather than on an empirical corpus.
Materials	Classical and contemporary sources on discourse theory	Austin, Searle, Grice, Halliday, Bakhtin, Foucault, Fairclough, van Dijk, Wodak, and Meyer were taken as key reference points.
Units of analysis	Concept, function, genre, context, institution, subject position	The units of analysis extend beyond the text itself but remain connected to linguistic evidence.
Visualization	Conceptual indexing and normalized weights	The figures are not results of a survey or experiment. They are used to make theoretical emphases visible.
Validity criteria	Transparent categories, theoretical coherence, density of textual evidence	Interpretation is assessed not by statistical representativeness but by grounding and coherence.

Conceptual indexing used a scale from 0 to 5. A higher value on this scale indicates a stronger analytical significance of dimensions such as linguistic form, context, power, or identification in a given theoretical approach. Percentage distributions have the same conditional status. They should not be read as frequencies or respondent answers.[7]

3. Results

3.1. The Concept of Discourse and Its Difference from Text

The analysis indicates that discourse can be understood in two senses. In a narrow linguistic sense, it denotes connected speech larger than the sentence. This definition is useful, but it does not fully capture the social force of discourse. In a broader approach, discourse is language in use, situated in context and organized through recurrent genres, norms, and expectations. Here the unit of analysis is not only the sentence but the event of meaning itself.[8]

The Table 2. difference between text and discourse is, above all, methodological. Text is a relatively stable product of speech activity. It can be printed, stored, copied, and

divided into segments. Discourse includes text, but it also covers the conditions of its production, circulation, and reception. For this reason, the same linguistic form may perform different social functions in different situations.[9]

Table 2. Analytical differences between text and discourse.

Criterion	Text	Discourse
Object of analysis	A stable written or spoken product	A configuration of text, context, speaker, audience, genre, and institutions
Relation to context	Context is treated as an external condition	Context is actively constructed and reconstructed within discourse
Main question	What units are present in the text?	Where, for whom, and with what authority do these units operate?
Stability	A relatively stable and transferable form	A historical, institutional, and interactional process
Example	The phrase "Assessment is required"	It may function as a bureaucratic instruction, a disciplinary warning, or a means of professional selection

Discourse also includes implicit assumptions. Scientific discourse presupposes procedures of verification, legal discourse presupposes codified authority, and political discourse presupposes boundaries of collective identification and legitimacy. Everyday discourse also contains shared background knowledge, even when interlocutors disagree with one another. The analyst therefore studies not only what has been said but also the prior conditions that allow an utterance to have force.

3.2. Theoretical Foundations of Discourse

The Table 3. theoretical foundation of discourse studies is not single-layered. Pragmatics brought to the center the idea that speech units perform actions. Austin and Searle introduced the issue of illocutionary force into linguistic analysis, while Grice grounded meaning in cooperation, inference, and implicature. From this perspective, discourse is not a simple expression. It is an action with conditions of uptake.[10]

Systemic functional linguistics interprets language as social semiotics. Halliday's ideational, interpersonal, and textual metafunctions enable discourse analysis to connect grammatical choices with social meaning. Modality, transitivity, evaluation, and thematic organization are not decorative details. They are resources for classifying reality and positioning the speaker.

Figure 1. Bakhtin's theory directs attention to dialogism: no speech unit is fully autonomous, since it responds to previous voices and anticipates future responses. Foucault gave discourse an epistemic and institutional meaning. Discursive formations regulate what can be said, by whom, from which position, and according to what criteria of truth. Later, critical discourse analysis connected linguistic details with ideology, domination, and resistance.[11]

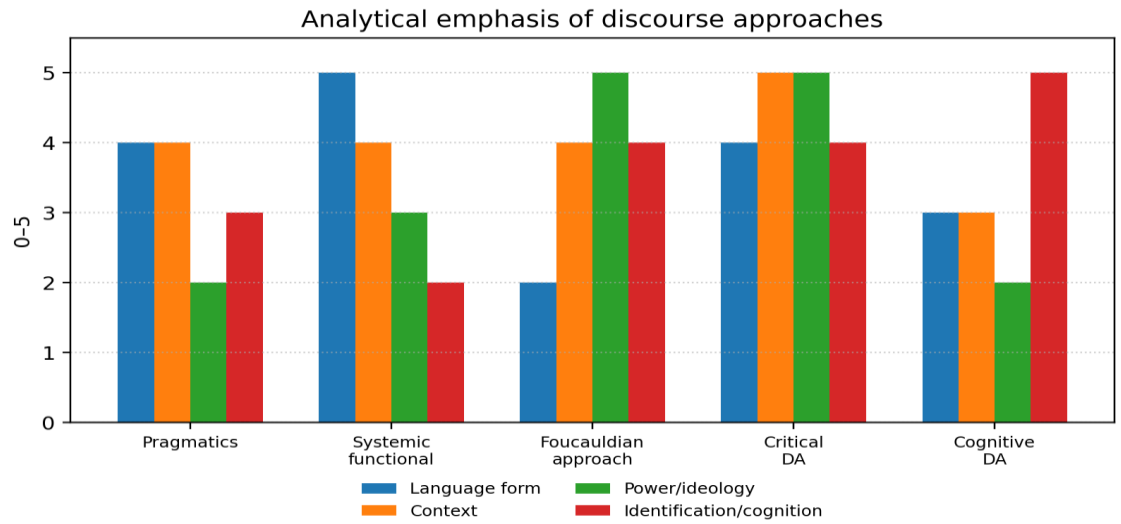


Figure 1. Analytical emphasis in discourse theories, based on a conceptual scale from 0 to 5.

Note. The figure is presented as a theoretical visualization; it is not the result of a survey or experiment.

Table 3. Major theoretical directions in discourse studies.

Theoretical direction	Analytical focus	Contribution to discourse analysis
Pragmatics and speech act theory	Speech unit, intention, uptake, implicature, illocutionary force	Explains how saying becomes action and how meaning depends on interactional conditions.
Systemic functional linguistics	Metafunctions, register, genre, grammar as choice	Connects linguistic form with social purpose and the context of situation.
Bakhtin's theory of dialogism	Voice, addressivity, heteroglossia, response	Interprets discourse not as a solitary message but as a field of voices.
Foucauldian archaeology and genealogy	Knowledge, institution, subject position, discursive formation	Connects discourse with regimes of truth and historically organized authority.
Critical discourse analysis	Power, ideology, inequality, legitimation, interdiscursivity	Studies discourse as a field in which social hierarchies are reproduced or contested.
Socio-cognitive discourse studies	Mental models, social cognition, ideology, memory	Explains how discourse mediates between social structures and the interpretation of subjects.

These directions do not cancel one another out. In a strong research design, they may be combined, provided that concepts are not mixed at random. Pragmatics grounds local interaction, systemic functional linguistics grounds grammatical choice, and critical discourse analysis grounds the relation between such findings and institutional power.

3.3. Functions of Discourse

The Table 4. functions of discourse are not elements added to language from the outside. They belong to the very existence of discourse. The first function is communicative: discourse coordinates interaction, enables the exchange of information, manages disagreement, and creates a shared field of attention. Communication, however, is not only a surface layer. Discourse also defines what information counts as relevant.

Figure 2. Through its cognitive function, communities name phenomena, construct categories, and stabilize explanatory models. Scientific concepts, moral classifications, and political labels are maintained through recurrent discursive practices. The regulative

function defines roles, permissions, and obligations. Legal, medical, administrative, and educational discourses regulate behavior through authorized vocabularies.[12]

Table 4. Functional typology of discourse.

Function	Main operation	Typical domains
Communicative	Coordinates interaction and enables information exchange.	Conversation, media, education, public debate
Cognitive	Organizes knowledge through categories, definitions, and explanatory patterns.	Science, expertise, journalism, politics
Regulative	Defines norms of obligation, permission, sanction, and procedure.	Law, administration, medicine, school
Identificational	Creates images of person, group, profession, nation, and otherness.	Politics, culture, professional communities
Ideological	Naturalizes values, hierarchies, and preferred interpretations.	Media discourse, political rhetoric, advertising
Institutional	Stabilizes roles, genres, and legitimate forms of speaking.	Court, university, hospital, state offices

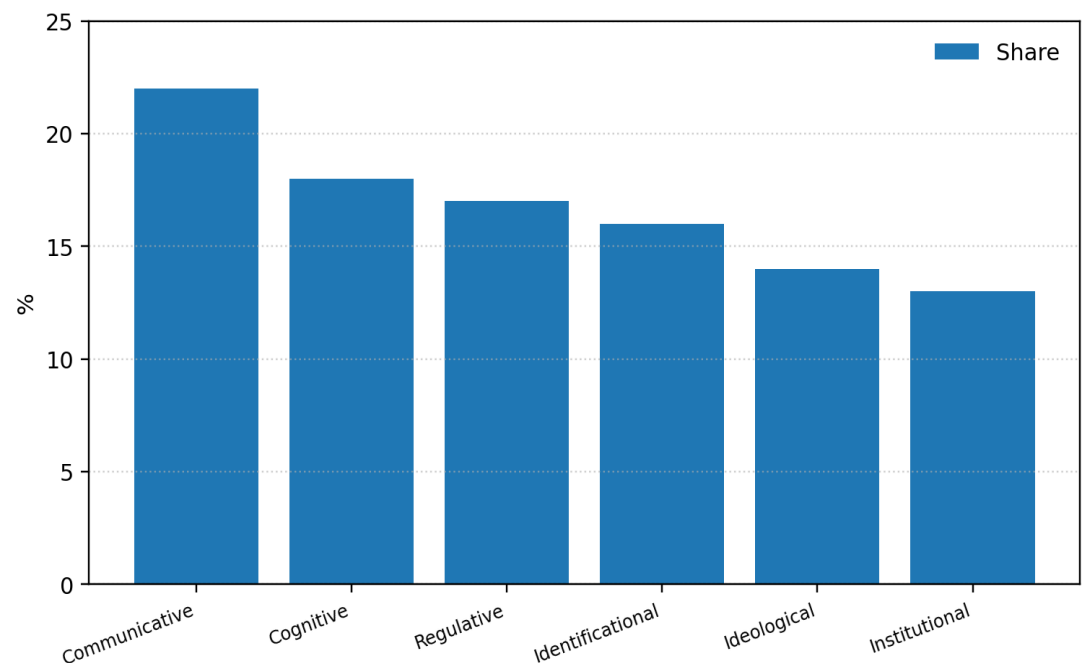


Figure 2. Functional profile of discourse analysis based on a conceptual synthesis of the literature.

Note. The percentages are normalized conceptual weights for visualization; they should not be interpreted as empirical frequencies.

Ideological and identificational functions often operate quietly. They do not always appear as explicit propaganda. They may be embedded in word choice, narrative sequencing, metaphor, presupposition, and routine genre rules. The institutional function connects language with procedure: a university regulation, a medical protocol, a police report, and a scholarly review form do not merely describe reality. They distribute legitimate roles and create routes through which decisions are made.[13]

3.4. An Analytical Model for Doctoral Research

The Table 5. results indicate that doctoral-level discourse analysis should not be limited to a thematic review. The researcher defines the corpus, justifies the selection criteria, determines the level of analysis, and explains the relation between micro-linguistic

findings and macro-social interpretation. The most effective designs move in two directions: they read lexical choice, modality, metaphor, argumentation, and genre; then they connect these details with institutions, identifications, and historical conditions.

Table 5. Layers of discourse analysis and coding units.

Layer	Analytical focus	Coding units
Textual layer	Cohesion, vocabulary, grammar, rhetorical organization	Lexical repetition, modality, transitivity, metaphor, thematic progression
Interactional layer	Turn-taking, address, politeness, inference, positioning	Question-answer pairs, evaluative units, expected responses, images of the addressee
Socio-institutional layer	Roles, genres, authority, procedure	Genre norms of records, judgments, lectures, diagnoses, and reviews
Epistemic layer	Truth claims and the boundaries of what can be said	Markers of expertise, types of evidence, rejected positions, silenced assumptions

Validity in discourse analysis is not identical with statistical representativeness. It rests on transparency, theoretical coherence, the logic of corpus construction, triangulation where possible, and the density of textual evidence. A small corpus may be strong if it is theoretically grounded and analytically careful. A large corpus remains weak if its categories are unclear.

4. Discussion

The conceptual results suggest that interpreting discourse only as a unit larger than the sentence remains too narrow. Such a definition preserves textual continuity, but it does not adequately cover the institutional and epistemic force of discourse. Discourse relies on text, yet it does not end with text. It is also connected with who owns the text, in what situation it is received, by which norms it is checked, and what social consequences it produces.

The differences among theoretical approaches may also be treated as a methodological resource. Pragmatics opens local action and conditions of uptake. Systemic functional linguistics identifies the social meaning of grammatical choices. The Foucauldian approach leads analysis toward the possibility of speaking, authority, and regimes of truth. Critical discourse analysis links these elements with inequality, legitimation, and social hierarchy. A slightly uncomfortable but productive claim can be made here: if discourse analysis remains confined to one theoretical school, it loses part of its object.[14]

At the same time, theoretical plurality requires caution. Adding any concept to any material does not strengthen analysis. On the contrary, it makes interpretation vague. For this reason, the methods section is especially important in IMRAD-based discourse research: it explains in advance the boundaries of the corpus, the selection of categories, the coding procedure, and the criteria of interpretation. The results section should then present not only general reflections but also precise categories, tables, examples, and units of analysis.

The layered model proposed for doctoral research balances close reading with social interpretation. Without textual detail, discourse analysis turns into vague sociological commentary. Without a broader field of practice, analysis remains at the level of ordinary stylistic observation. Working between these two extremes is probably the most difficult, but also the most productive, path for discourse analysis.

Digital communication makes this model even more relevant. Platforms do not merely host communication. They sort it, format it, recommend it, and regulate the speed of circulation. Contemporary discourse analysis therefore needs to consider, together with

text and context, issues of interface, datafication, and algorithmic visibility. This problem still requires a separate empirical investigation.[15]

5. Conclusion

Discourse should be understood as a complex analytical object located between language and society. It is textual, because it has linguistic form. It is pragmatic, because it performs action. It is cognitive, because it organizes knowledge and interpretation. It is social, because it distributes roles and legitimacies. It is historical, because discursive possibilities never emerge from nowhere: they inherit genres, institutions, exclusions, and habitual patterns of meaning.

This article has repositioned the concept of discourse within the IMRAD format and has considered how a theoretical article can also acquire a clear structure in this format. The introduction defined the problem and research questions. The methods section described the procedure of conceptual analysis. The results systematized the definition of discourse, its theoretical foundations, its functions, and its analytical layers. The discussion connected these findings with doctoral research, validity, and digital mediation.

For work at the PhD level, the most effective path is a balanced approach. The researcher should combine close linguistic reading with explicit theoretical assumptions and transparent methodological procedures. In that case, the concept of discourse becomes not a fashionable label but a precise scholarly instrument for studying how language participates in the formation of knowledge, power, identification, and social order.

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