READING AND UNDERSTANDING TEXTS FROM A LINGUISTICS PERSPECTIVE: WHAT SHOULD WE KNOW AND TAKE INTO CONSIDERATION?

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Abstract:

This present study seeks to highlight the teaching of literary texts through the implementation and analysis of discourse. It attempts to confirm that discourse-integrated literature teaching may be an important aspect in foreign language education in Biskra University. The researcher's hypothesis stems out of the belief that some knowledge of the reciprocal influence between text and context, the negotiation of meaning between author and reader, and all the linguistic deviations from language norms is necessary to develop empirical interpretations of texts.

Therefore, the major aim of this paper is to suggest a new way for reading and understanding texts, a more practical activity than the mere thematic analysis of texts that has been performed for years.

Key words: teaching of literary texts، discourse-integrated literature، text and context، negotiation of meaning، linguistic deviations، empirical interpretations

ملخـــص:

تريد هذه الدراسة تسليط الضوء و إبراز تدريس النصوص الأدبية من خلال استعمال وتحليل الخطاب. فهي تحاول أن تؤكد أن تدريس مادة الأدب من خلال الخطاب يمكن أن يكون جانبا مهما في تعليم اللغة الأجنبية (الانجليزية) في جامعة بسكرة. الفرضية الأساسية في هذه الدراسة تعتمد أساسا على أهمية فهم التأثير المتبادل بين النص والوسط، الحوار حول المعنى بين الكاتب و القارئ، وكل ما هو شذوذ أو انحراف عن قواعد اللغة كعادة علمية تسهل فهم النصوص و تأويلها.

لذلك فان الهدف الرئيس من خلال هذا العمل هو اقتراح طريقة جديدة لقراءة النصوص و فهمها، بدلا من التحليل السطحي الذي استعمل لسنوات.

الكلمات المفتاحية: تدريس النصوص الأدبية ، الخطاب، تعليم اللغة الأجنبية (الانجليزية) في جامعة بسكرة ، فهم النصوص و تأويلها.

Introduction:

This study is primarily intended to introduce discourse as a new paradigm to interpret texts. Its major aim is to provide teachers and students with few key terms and key concepts which the researcher deems necessary in the field of literary Texts, and to give them an opportunity to look at other interesting areas with a close eye.

Therefore, it is within this paper that areas ranging from identifying Discourse Analysis to highlighting it as a convenient tool for analysing written texts and case studies research are covered. It is also within this paper that the researcher will expose his understanding of discourse elements and discourse analysis facets. Moreover, the researcher will demonstrate in some detail the relationships between discourse analysis and the other disciplines, from a linguistics point of view, and how each discipline labels and uses the term.

1. Text and Context

Sometimes, it is difficult to make a distinction between "text" and "context". Coulthard (1977) sees that "text is the verbal record of a communicative event" (p.190). That is, what is produced as language or material is termed "text" while the conditions or circumstances in which the text is written are the "context". In other words, without a context (social and cultural) a text is a mere string of words, sentences, and paragraphs. Moreover, the communicative significance of the text is then largely determined by criteria outside the linguistic items that a writer may use in a genre of writing whatsoever. In this same vein, in an attempt to combine bioth terms as a linguistic and a literary material, Schiffrin (Cited in Alba-Juez, 2009, p.8) says:

…In terms of utterances, then, "text" is the linguistic content: the stable semantic meanings of words, expressions, and sentences, but not the inferences to hearers depending upon the contexts in which words, expressions, and sentences are used. …Context is thus a world filled with people producing utterances: people who have social, cultural, and personal identities, knowledge, beliefs, goals and wants, and who interact with one another in various socially and culturally defined situations.

The first two lines of the above citation suggest that "text" is the spoken or written form of discourse, which is considered to be the

linguistic material or content. This latter (words, expressions, and sentences) may have various meanings, depending on various criteria such as the users of the language, their culture, knowledge, beliefs, and personalities. The last four lines of the citation identify clearly the term "context". They single out the criteria which shape as well as determine the meanings (message) intended by discourse. Discourse, at this level, implies what is deliberately meant to be communicated with the hearer or reader. To sum up, "context" is the container of "text"; i.e. without "context" "text" is vague, meaningless, and almost unapproachable by analysts.

2. Text and Meaning

Meaning in any text is made up of many other meanings. The meanings of the individual words combine together to form the meanings of sentences; the meanings of sentences combine together to form the meanings of paragraphs; the meanings of paragraphs, in their turn, combine together to form larger units of meaning. Elbow (1998, p. 315) states:

When you come to a word you don't know, you may have to look it up in the dictionary and then try out the different definitions to see which one is intended here…for everything you read, you must bring meanings to the words, not take meanings from them. Meanings are in readers, not in words.

Meaning in a discourse ; however, is made up of the meanings of its constituent expressions or sentences, and the meaning of each expression or sentence derives from the meanings of its constituent words. Furthermore, the structures of the constituent expressions of discourse are taken as structures of meanings; i.e. the organisation of sentences as predicates and arguments are interpreted as other sources of meaning. Hence, the interpretation of the overall meaning does not stop at this level. Bennet (1995, pp. 35-36) claimed that it depends heavily on the reader's ability to match and adjust the text with the context, and on the reader's smooth and gradual building and linking of ideas while moving from one sentence or one paragraph to another (Cited in Hadjoui and Kheladi, 2014, p. 124) .

3. What is discourse?

The relationship between language and context or our intentions

and the kind of language we use is a relation of reciprocity. It is the situation in which we are interacting that dictates what resources we have to use as spoken or written language because in different situations or circumstances we need and use different levels of the language in question. However, sometimes, it is the level of language used that creates the situation. Differently stated, the *Who* (identity) and *What* (activity) of a particular situation are projected through a particular language and the meanings which we exchange to communicate these *Whos* and *Whats* through well selected utterances are discourses (Gee, 1999, pp.11-14). In this same vein, Adjei (2013) points out that "The production of language and meaning making significantly depend on the context of language use and repertoires available to people involved in social discourse"(p.5). Here, the relationship between language and context is equated to the relationship between language and the production of meaning in the various social contexts where speakers rely on what they store in mind and find available and appropriate.

The term "discourse", for many years, has not been deliberately used by scholars. It has been vague or rather used with different meanings in different contexts, but one common idea is that "language is structured according to different patterns that people's utterances follow when they take part in different domains of social life"(Jorgenson and Philips, 2002, p. 1). Accordingly, "Discourse Analysis" is the analysis of these language patterns. The term "discourse" is just not easy to define, for it is used in different ways. In terms of structure, the discourses of particular texts such as recipes are mere lists on which details about names of meals, ingredients, and descriptions are offered, and, sometimes, the applications of this term "discourse" vary to span areas like political discourse, colonial discourse, media discourse and so on (Baker,2006,p.3).

3.1 Types of Discourse
3.1.1 Spoken and Written Discourses

Leech, Deuchar and Hoogenraad (1982) maintain that "The term DISCOURSE applies to both spoken and written language (literary and non-literary), in fact to any sample of language used for any purpose" (p. 133). Namely, there are two major types of discourse: Spoken discourse and written discourse, and though spoken discourse is more appreciated by analysts, written discourse has its own value in

society because it is visual, i.e. it is easy to investigate and to interpret. However, from a general perspective, both types of discourse are looked at as good sources of communication. "Writing is intrinsically no 'better' or 'worse' than speech, but each performs different function in society, uses different forms, and exhibits different linguistic characteristics" (ibid).

Writing is highly estimated by analysts because of the easiness of its communicative intentions. When an author writes something it is because there is a need to inform, to sensitise and to enhance the public to act in response to an issue, and the power or strength of the message depends largely on the sophistication of the author's style. The more the latter is sophisticated, the stronger the message becomes. Flynn and Stainthorp (2006) note that "Writing has a communicative function. We write to communicate to others or to communicate to our selves. In the early stages of writing, when skills are fairly rudimentary, this communicative function may be considerably reduced"(p. 55).

In support of the previous view about the two forms of discourse or more simply the two aspects of language, many scholars uphold that "Speech and writing are both forms of communication that use the medium of language, but they do so quite differently"(Knapp and Watkins, 2005, p. 15). They state (ibid, p. 18), in an attempt to explain the core differences between these aspects and what makes writing a good option, that:

Texts are always produced in a context. While texts are produced by individuals, individuals produce those texts as social subjects; in particular, social environments. In other words, texts are never completely individual or original; they always relate to a social environment and to other texts.

They add that all of this refers to the way people receive language. Most of the time, language is produced and received as cohesive units within the boundaries of momentous, social environments. These latter involve several interrelated conditions and values, which determine both the semantic and pragmatic dimensions of those cohesive units and make of them complete acts of communication. Speech is often individual, not social; i.e. it is not often controlled by context as is the case of text (ibid, p. 29).

3.1.2 Transactional and Interpersonal Discourses

In classifying discourse types, it is better and more strategic to distinguish the communicative *jobs* they bring about. On the whole, language is used for two major purposes: transactional and interpersonal. "Transactional language is that which occurs when the participants are concerned with the exchange of goods and services. Interpersonal language, on the other hand, occurs when the speakers are ….with socializing"(Nunan, 1993, p.18). Sometimes, the primary purpose of language use is neither the former nor the latter. "It fulfils an expressive or aesthetic function"(ibid, p.19). Literature is then a third major purpose when people use language; literature is more interpersonal because it is first and foremost a means of communication. This communicative property of literature (written form/ texts) asserts the existence of different types of discourses, depending on the purpose of communication, its context and the interaction of the reader with the text as he or she starts reading it.

From a functional point of view, texts are said to fulfill "ideational", "interpersonal", and "textual" functions simultaneously. Halliday stated that there exists "different kinds of meaning potential that relate to the most general functions that language has evolved to serve" (Cited in Muto-Humphrey, Discourse Analysis through Interpersonal Meaning, p. 94). According to him, ideational meanings are best expressed by the ways in which the language is used to talk about one's actions, feelings, beliefs, situations, and so on, the participants or people and things, the pertinent settings of time, place, and the rest of it. Interpersonal meanings refer to the ways in which we interact through language, and more precisely to the roles (provider/ recipient of information) they play when information is being transmitted through a text. Textual meanings deal with the way in which language is organised in a text with regard to its context.

Texts are seen as being multifunctional because discourses appear as parts of social practices or ways of acting, representing, and being. To put the point differently, they are viewed in terms of "the relationship of the text to the event, to the wider physical and social world, and to the persons involved in the event" (Fairclough, Analysing Discourse: Textual analysis for social research, p.27). The three functions, action, representation, and identification can be seen both in entire texts and in small portions of them.

Written texts are preferred to spoken or oral ones in discourse studies for many reasons. First, written texts are easy to experience or practice; there are infinite numbers of them in libraries, archives and data bases. Second, they are easy to read, to check, and to examine at any moment. Third, most of them come as records of interactions, events, histories, and other human particularities (Johnstone , 2008, pp. 264-265)

3.2 Discourse and (the) Other Disciplines

According to OConnor (1995), Discourse Analysis has always been used in the social sciences such as sociology, anthropology, psychology, political science and history to get into the depths of various phenomena through the investigation of texts (Cited in Heracleous, 2006, p.1). If the common focus between these disciplines is on the structure and inter-textual features of individual texts and their effects on the context, then language can be viewed as a sample of discourse or discourses.

3.2. 1 Discourse and Literature

Discourse and literature is an area that needs to be investigated and considered from several perspectives. One of these perspectives is that literary texts are known to deviate from the rules of the language, and thus they do not fully exemplify the grammatical system which they derive from. However, the linguistic deviations in these texts are not accidental and their meanings are understood, at least in part, within the context in which they appear (Brown and Yule, 1983, p. 27). That is, literary texts must be seen not only as texts in their narrow senses, but also as pieces of discourse (Widdowson, 1975, p. 27). Another perspective is that most of human linguistic communication is rarely achieved by the use of sentences in isolation; it rather requires other specific units (discourses). These latter are not determined in terms of size or quantity, but in terms of performance. Chapman (1989, p. 100) put it as follows:

In fact stylistics, whatever style is being investigated, cannot proceed very far without recognition of units above the sentence…A unit of linguistic performance which stands complete in itself is commonly called a discourse. The name gives no information about size, style or quantity. At the lower end of the scale it can be a single imperative-'Stop'- and the upper end is completely open as far as analysis is concerned…

The first idea that can be picked up from Chapman's words is that the interpretation of discourse enables the reader to establish both the discourse and linguistic features of the text. This strategy enables the critical reader or analyst to examine the varied linguistic choices as well as the different discourse types used in poetry, drama, and prose fiction. It provides an effective association between discourse and literature, by its implementation of specific discourse devices for the investigation of the form and function of language at work.

The second idea is that discourse analysis and stylistics overlap when there is a need for examining language functions. Their combination serves to analyse the communicating function of language by means of several interpretative tools.

3. 2.2 Discourse and Linguistics

Discourse and linguistics is another area that deserves exploration. Here the emphasis must be put on the texture of discourse or discourse structure. Literary genres such as poems, narratives, dramas, and even prayers all have their own discourse structures (Halliday and Hassan, 1976, p.327). The texture of discourse in each of these genres is governed by the adherence of different devices: some rely on cohesion to tie their parts and others are confined to strict norms such as meter and rhyme. Moreover, the analysis of a genre which takes into consideration discourse structure is one that aims at discussing the categories of texts and teaching them to people who want to be competent members in particular communities (Johnstone, 2008, pp.181-183). Thus, the relation between discourse and linguistics is a relation of form and categorisation, a relation of structure and classification.

Relying on the above examples, one could say that discourse analysis is multidisciplinary or, in other words, it crosses the boarder of linguistics into other fields. Van Dijk (Cited in Alba-Juez, 2009, pp.9-

10) says that discourse is multidisciplinary and due to this feature " We should devise theories that are complex and account both for the textual, the cognitive, the social, the political and the historical dimension of discourse".

Therefore, analysing discourse requires the inclusion of social, political and cultural elements. That is to say, discourse is the subject matter of researchers from a variety of domains, especially those where language use is a crucial inquiry. Johnstone (2008) views discourse analysis " as a research method that can be (and is being) used by scholars with a variety of academic and non-academic affiliations, coming from a variety of disciplines, to answer a variety of questions"(p. xi). The answers of the latter depend mainly on the text and context of the discourse or discourses utilised.

3.3 Discourse Analysis as a Qualitative Method for Analysing Written Texts

Research on language variation and the incorporation of various criteria such as culture (norms of interaction and norms of interpretation) to enhance language learning has led to the emergence, and at times, to the creation of various methods to collect and examine data from close sources (teachers and students). Discourse analysis may be one pertinent method for this inquiry. Trappes-Lomax believes that "Discourse research is mainly qualitative because it is inherently interpretive" (Cited in Davies and Elder, 2004, p. 141). This justifies the fact that discourse analysis is, by nature, an effective tool for studying texts, where there is always an imminent combination of phenomena such as ethnicity, religion, gender, politics, and other social practices. Equally important is that the role of discourse analysis, as argued by Denzin and Lincoln, is "to make sense of or to interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (Cited by Trappes-Lomax in Davies and Elder, 2004, p. 141). That is, the unit of investigation is meaning, and this latter is reinforced by the whole body of systematic interpretations made by people within an original context.

When specialists study a text from a discourse perspective, they do not study only the sentences which make it up, but they move beyond them. They determine and examine the parts of larger constructions produced and arranged appropriately. "Broadly speaking, the study of discourse is the study of units of language and language use consisting of more than a single sentence, but connected by some

system of related topics" (Akmajian et al, 2001, p.387). Furthermore, in our study of discourse, we stress the speaker's or the writer's choices of syntax; i.e. we explore the sentence structure of the text in question with regard to the context and the organisation of information, which make the text cohesive and coherent. Brinton, L.J. and Brinton, D.M. (2010) maintain that:

The conscious choice of one linguistic formulation over another is not restricted to literary language. In everyday language use, we are always making choices about how to express ourselves. The syntax of the language provides alternate ways of saying the same thing. …The choice often depends on contextual factors, especially the context of the immediate discourse. We organize our discourse in a particular way in order to create cohesive and coherent texts…

Having seen some of the areas targeted by discourse analysis, we may now suggest that discourse analysis may address specific research questions such as the failure of students   to understand literary texts or interpret them from stylistic perspectives. That is, the implementation of discourse devices such as cohesion, coherence, situationality, and intertextuality in the study of literary texts may lesson students' fear for reading and improve their deduction of meaning.

3.4 Discourse Analysis and Text Interpretation

Discourse analysis then came as a result of the need for describing language scientifically or in its context. Applied linguists believe that all language stretches are perceived by their users as meaningful and unified units, and that unity and meaning are reinforced by the aspect of context. Cook (2003, p. 50) noted that:

Because some linguists claim that it is not easy to describe language systematically or language in context, Applied Linguistics has developed Discourse Analysis. Discourse analysis is then the study of how stretches of language in context are perceived as meaningful and unified by their users.

Thus, what is meant by this analysis is not only the literary language, but any text or a portion of it taken from a given material. Material here is the source of the discourse sample which one happens to come across and analyse. As it was recognised by Z.S. Harris (Cited

in Chapman, 1989, p. 101), discourse analysis is a method of looking for structure (let's say meaning) in any material (language or language-like) that is made up of more than one sentence.

Analysing discourse, as we have mentioned earlier in this chapter, is the process of evaluating the overall meaning of a text. Texts are generally assumed to function as carriers of communication or messages between writers and readers for different purposes. This assumption gives the idea that the job of writers can not be complete unless their discourses are decoded from texts and the meanings of texts are deciphered from between the lines by readers. Therefore, the readers of a text must be viewed as participants in drawing the communicating functions of language (Miššíková, 2009, p. 66). But, the question that rises here is *what kind of readers or participants are really needed*? or *what must these participants do to interpret texts?* One of the significant answers to these questions, at a time, is found in Johnstones' (2008, pp. 128-129) words:

One traditional way of thinking about the participants in discourse is to imagine the 'author' of a text …as the primary source of its meaning, the one who decides what to say, how to say it, and what others should take it to mean…if the decoding participants do not accurately reconstruct the speaker's intended meaning, then they have misunderstood, whether because the speaker/author failed to make his or her intentions clear or because the hearers/readers have not used the correct interpretive strategies.

The interpretation of texts on the part of readers and the interpretability of texts on the part of writes is the essence of the study of discourse. It is an effort made by both participants, and it is based largely on their linguistic knowledge. Yule (1996, p. 140), in reminding us of what takes place in a discourse analysis, claimed that:

It is this effort to interpret (and to be interpreted), and how we accomplish it, that are the key elements investigated in the study of discourse. To arrive at an interpretation, and to make our messages interpretable, we certainly rely on what we know about linguistic form and structure.

  Writers have to supply the readers and the analysts with cues which help them to interpret texts, and thus their messages achieve the targets they are produced for. Communicative intentions may not be fully deciphered, but language forms and structures are never immune to systematic analysis.

Conclusion

  In conclusion, the researcher would defend the integration of discourse in teaching literature (texts) on the basis of the arguments set out above. First, discourse in the literature of the target language may enhance the learners' cognitive abilities to distinguish between the discourses of particular texts (political, colonial, media, etc). Second, the interpretation or analysis of discourse enables the critical reader to examine the varied linguistic choices as well as the different discourse types used in poetry, drama, and prose fiction. Third, discourse and discourse analysis help readers and writers to achieve the essense of the study of discourse: the interpretation and the interpretability of texts.

  Our main objective has been to give some elucidation of the multiple perceptions and applications of analysis, to identify it and to describe some of its benefits in the field of literature, and to open doors for students to make use of it wherever they feel the need for reconsidering language consciously, intentionally and systematically.

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