

## THE PRODUCTIVE PROCESS OF A DISCOURSE

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### **ABSTRACT**

*To produce a discourse is not nearly the same as to create a textual document by assembling freely available units of language expecting that those elements will only fall into place by themselves. On the contrary, it has a great deal more to do with the coming into play of real sociocultural elements. But, these elements alone, without the involvement of both the discourse-producer (the writer) and the discourse-consumer (or the reader), will just not suffice it. The present study, therefore, aims to show that a lively dialectic between the sociocultural contexts and the above social actors or discursive participants is really required because, without it, no discourse or its meaning can ever materialize.*

**Keywords:** *Social Actors, Discursive Representation of Reality*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The aim of the present study is to explore the whole process of discursive production. This, as we shall see, involves the coming into play of the three *social actors* or *discursive participants*; i.e. the sociocultural contexts, the discursive producer, and the discursive community. Thus, the present study seeks to disclose in detail the entire process in which each of the above social actors or discursive participants play a part in the production or emergence of a discursive text or a discourse.

### **TEXT VERUS DISCOURSE**

To begin with, *discourse* and *text* are two terms which are often used interchangeably as near-synonyms (see, for instance, Salkie, 1995; Crystal, 1997 (2003); Widdowson, 2007). However, as far as the analytical method of DA adopted in the present study is concerned, they are clearly distinguished. Even though both are formed by the same language units, they can be understood and treated differently.

Generally speaking, a text is a stretch of language (both spoken and written) of the most basic nature. It is, "the verbal record of a communicative act" (Brown & Yule, 1983, p. 6). As such, a text is meant to contribute primarily towards the formation of a *semantic meaning*. Therefore, the text itself shall only remain as a less meaningful piece of verbal evidence of a communicative act without a reader or a hearer's ability in working out its real meaning (Widdowson, 2007).

Conversely, a discourse offers another type of meaning which is sometimes referred to as *pragmatic meaning* as opposed to semantic meaning (see Paltridge, 2000; Yule, 1996). It is especially thought of as being inseparable from the extra-textual contexts that provide it with its actual meaning. In other words, a discourse is so much more dynamic or alive as it can go in and come out of a text, as it were. In fact, it is the former which enables the latter to assume meaning. In Widdowson's (2007, p. 6) phraseology, "Texts, in this view, do not contain meaning, but are used to mediate it across discourses."

Fairclough's (1989) treatment of the two terms is, therefore, referred to here because it may be the most illuminating so far. According to him (1989), a text can clearly be distinguished from a discourse because the former is literally produced by the latter. Whereas a discourse is involved in the

social process of production and interpretation, a text is only its consequential outcome and, for that matter, can as well be treated as a resource for interpretation:

“A text is a product rather than a process – a product of the process of text production. But I shall use the term **discourse** to refer to the whole process of social interaction of which a text is just a part. This process includes in addition to the text the process of production, of which the text is a product, and the process of interpretation, for which the text is a resource” (Fairclough, 1989, p. 24).

Therefore, a discourse can be rightly viewed as superior to a text especially for the reason that it is the former, indeed, which provides the latter with its meaning. But, it must, nevertheless, be stated immediately here that, even though the discourse “underlies the text and motivates its production in the first place” (Widdowson, 2007, p. 6), the former cannot afford to generate meaning off its contexts.

For a discourse to have a meaning, it must first have the contexts from which it shall attain the meaning. It follows from here, therefore, that unless the discourse is supported by its clear sociocultural contexts, it shall only be void of meaning.

### THE SOCIOCULTURAL CONTEXTS OF DISCOURSE

By sociocultural practices are meant the relatively permanent social realities; such as, identities, institutions and norms which are encountered in a given society. Often referred to as *social structures* (see also Wallace, 2000), these practices give rise to an essential *social order* with which all the social elements can co-exist harmoniously together (Longhurst, Smith, Bagnall, Crawford & Ogborn, 2013).

However, the above sociocultural practices cannot possibly occur in a vacuum. For them to exist, they must first survive their continuing contestation with other contending practices in a given society. Based on the Darwinian principle of the survival of the fittest, the most dominant, influential and pervasive sociocultural practices are the ones which have won the most social support because the society has chosen to reject their rival practices (see also Bridges & Desmond, 2000). Eventually, these sociocultural practices become *the* leading ideologies and, until after they are socially replaced, shall remain so (see Fairclough, 1989; 1992).

It is these sociocultural practices in actual fact which strongly dictate on the way discourses are produced (Fairclough, 1989; 1992; Gee, 2001). However, as there are too many of them at the same time and place, it is hard, indeed, for all of these sociocultural practices to be immediately useful or impactful. They, therefore, should be mediated by what is referred to as *the order of discourses* (Fairclough, 1989; 1992).

The order of discourses can be seen as a systematized version of all the sociocultural factors put together. In Fairclough’s (2009, p. 3) phraseology, it is “the relatively durable social structuring of and networking of social practices.” Thus, instead of all the sociocultural practices themselves, it is the order of discourses which shall act as a platform, as it were, providing a means for both the production and the consumption of a discursive text to occur.

According to Fairclough (1989), the sociocultural practices, nevertheless, manifest at three different levels; namely, the *situational*, *institutional* and *social* levels. At the situational level, it is the situations or events occurring in society at a certain time and place which trigger off the emergence of a discursive text. This is to say that the situational context offers itself as an important background against which the occurrence of the discursive text constitutes a reaction.

At the institutional level, according to Fairclough (1989), certain conditions or requirements within an institution can also function as the cause for a discursive text to emerge. The institutional conditions or requirements here can be rules or conventions which restrict members of society in

carrying out their activities. Thus, it can happen that a certain discursive text can emerge as a result of certain institutional pressures, as it were (Fairclough, 1989).

Lastly, at the social level, certain realities in society can also act as a necessary trigger for the appearance of a discursive text. Such social realities, for instance, may include sociocultural systems such as political, economic and cultural values which are embraced by the majority of people in society. These social realities often appear as the most dominant or the most powerful ideologies. Thus, it follows from here that they too can function as a context for the birth of a discursive text (Fairclough, 1989).

Without the abovementioned sociocultural contexts, which divide into the situational, institutional and social conditions, a discursive text can never take shape (Fairclough, 1989). Even though, the discourse-maker or the author may appear to be the producer of a discursive text, in actual fact, it is the sociocultural conditions themselves which play an instrumental role in the production of the discourse (see Duranti, 1985).

The direct implication of what has been mentioned earlier on, say, the examination of a discursive text is that the analyst must make an inevitable revisit to its sociocultural contexts. After all, it is these contexts which have enabled its production in the first place (Duranti, 1985). The investigation of the contexts is essential because it constitutes the way by which the discourse analyst can expect to scrutinize the otherwise concealed meaning of the discursive text based on his/her past experience (Brown & Yule, 1983). The analytical procedure to examine the sociocultural contexts of a discursive text under investigation is referred as the sociocultural version of discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1989).

Thus far, the above discussion has made it clear that the production of a discursive text is inseparable from the instrumental role of the sociocultural practices encountered in its discursive community. For one thing this is because it is for this particular society or community, indeed, that the discourse has been initially produced. In the next section, another social actor or participant who plays an instrumental role in the productive process of a discourse shall be explored. This is the discourse-producer or, in simple wording, the author.

### **THE DISCURSIVE PRODUCER OR *THE AUTHOR***

With the abovementioned sociocultural elements so pervasive and domineering in the production of a discursive text, the role of the discourse-producer may seem to have been somewhat marginalized or subordinated here. Even though the author can no longer claim to be the authentic owner or originator of a discourse (Fairclough, 2009), s/he remains irreplaceably significant (see Wu, 2011). Instead of being seen as a creator, the discourse producer, according to Xin (2000, p. 255), had better be considered as “an assembler” which means one who works to produce a discursive text by drawing upon all the already-existing sociocultural practices.

As an assembler, the discourse-producer plays an instrumental role in putting together the otherwise free-floating sociocultural elements into a certain discursive form or structure which fits a particular society and culture (Kress as cited in Xin, 2000; see also Bazerman, 2004). At least, in relation to the discursive productive process, two essential tasks of the discourse-producer can be immediately identified here.

Firstly, the author must faithfully draw on the common stock of language to produce a discursive text. To create a text, s/he must make use of the already-existing language resources (especially the lexical and the grammatical resources) which are constantly available not only to the author but also to all members of the language community regardless (see Xin, 2000).

Lastly, the discourse-producer also draws on prior discourses and texts in the production of his/her own discursive text. To invent a discourse, the author shall as well make good use of the two other ready resources; namely, the numerous existing discourses and texts produced by earlier authors

(Fairclough, 1989; 1992; 2009; Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002). The author, in other words, will revisit and relate to them for the primary purpose of producing a hybridized discursive text.

In spite of the essential role of the discourse-producer as discussed above, the role of the reading public or *the discourse community* (also known as the last *discursive participant* or *social actor*) in the production of a discursive text should never be overlooked. In fact, the discourse-consumer or the discourse community is of equal importance, indeed. This shall now be discussed in the next section.

## THE ROLE OF THE DISCURSIVE COMMUNITY

To begin with, the author or the discourse-producer cannot possibly produce a discursive text without any clear audience at all in his /her mind. This idea must be clearly understood at the outset because a social vacuum like this cannot possibly trigger off the emergence of a new discursive text in the first place. For a discourse to be produced, there must already be a real readership or a *discourse community* to whom the text can be addressed (Fairclough, 1989; 1992; 2009).

The above discussion has clearly indicated that the social contexts are *the* point of departure of the productive process of a discourse. But, it must nevertheless be stressed here that, in spite of their highly instrumental role, these social conditions are often too abstract to be of immediate use. In other words, they cannot be immediately impactful for the discursive production. Thus, as far as the discursive production is concerned, it is not those abstract social conditions, but *the discourse community* which in actual fact bears so much more direct relevance.

The discourse community constitutes a group of people who are all equal members of the same community. As such, they are characterized by the use of the same methods or ways of communication among themselves (Paltridge, 2012). Over time, these people develop their own genres, particular terms and vocabulary as well as expertise in particular fields:

“...[T]he discourse community will have particular ways of communicating with each other and ways of getting things done that have developed through time. There will also be a threshold level of expertise in the use of the genres the discourse community uses for its communications for someone to be considered a member of that community” (Paltridge, 2012, p. 15).

It is not hard, therefore, to imagine that in such a community there are often to be found various social forces or groups who are each contending for domination or power. And, the one which triumphs over all the others—and, this is usually the majority group—is the one that determines the social structures to be supported by the entire discourse community. In the meantime, the other minority groups shall only accept acquiescently.

## THE PROCESS OF DISCURSIVE PRODUCTION

To produce a discourse is not nearly the same as to create a textual document by assembling freely-available units of language expecting that those elements will only fall into place by themselves. On the contrary, it has a great deal more to do with the coming into play of real sociocultural elements. But, these elements alone, without the involvement of both the *discourse-producer* (the writer) and the *discourse-consumer* (or the reader), will just not suffice it. Therefore, a lively dialectic between the sociocultural contexts and the above *social actors* or *discursive participants* is really required because, without it, no discourse or its meaning can ever materialize.

As the discourse-producer constitutes an integral part of his/her discourse community, the former shall almost naturally identify with it socioculturally. This community, in other words, shapes and furnishes the author with certain attributes or attachments which s/he shares with the rest of the members of the same discourse community. It can be imagined, therefore, that, without this community,

there would be no author at all. Viewed from another perspective, the discourse-producer can naturally be considered to be acting as its representative.

The direct consequence of the above is that both the discourse-producer and the other members of the discourse community would more often than not share the same world view. They would even share the same amount of background knowledge and the same identities, institutions and norms. To refer to Fairclough's (1989) phraseology, they both are in possession of the same "Members' Resources" or "MR" (p. 141) which they have kept in their "long-term memory" (p. 11). In simpler wording, these resources are "their linguistic knowledge, values, beliefs, assumptions, etc., which are shaped by social conditions and used in production and interpretation of texts" (Ghazali, 2004, p. 26).

It is no wonder that the discursive production would rely quite substantially upon the author's MR. This MR would enable the author to provide his/her discursive text with its acquired meaning. Without it, the author would not be able to produce a discourse. It can be rightly said here, therefore, that the author's MR is absolutely instrumental to the process of a discursive text coming into being (Fairclough, 1989; 1992).

It has also been indicated above that the discourse community would constitute the reason why a new discourse is produced. What this implies is that all discursive texts are produced in order to be consumed by their reading audiences. No discourse, therefore, is produced to serve the void. Though there may be certain literary texts which are not written for public consumption, most texts are written by their authors with a clear target audience in mind.

The discourse community, as is now clear, plays a crucial role here as it determines what type of discourse can be produced and how it should be produced. Anything that is produced without attending to the interests of its discourse community shall generally be neglected or rejected. It is little wonder that the approval by the discourse community should be initially secured so that the would-be discourse can function to enhance or strengthen its position of power or domination.

Thus far, it is clear that the discourse community really has an irreplaceable role to play in the productive process of a discourse. Not only that it highly influences it; it also determines what the discourse-producer should do. To a certain extent, it can even be said that the discourse community would dictate on what the author should or should not write. This is why the author would often bow down to the pressure of the discourse community that s/he represents, as it were.

By now it should be clear that a discourse is produced only by an author who is supported or, even, dictated by the sociocultural interests of his/her discourse community. This productive process is complex, indeed, as it requires that there be a continuous interactive dialog between the sociocultural contexts of the discourse on the one hand and its discourse community as well as its author on the other.

### **THE PRESENTATION OF *REALITY* BY THE DISCURSIVE PRODUCER**

Thus far, the only thing which has not been made clear enough, however, is how the discursive producer represents the *reality* in his/her discursive text. In other words, what is the sort of impact that the process of discursive production above can have on the representation of *reality* by the author in his/her discursive text. This should, therefore, be the last subject matter to be discussed in the present paper.

In real life, the discourse-producer shall more often than not find him/herself in the presence of such contending discourses. These already-existing discourses represent diverse versions of exchanges of educated opinions or arguments. However, like the social structures themselves which are competitive towards one another, these discourses too are constantly in contestation with one another in order to survive and to have a dominant impact (see Gee, 2001).

In such a sociocultural milieu, not only that the discourse-producer may be affected by the numerous existing discourses, but s/he can also be strongly drawn towards them. In fact, as is often the case, the author may even go as far as drawing upon or referring to the bits and pieces of those prior discourses or *the order of discourses* for the purpose of creating his/her discursive text (Fairclough, 1989; 1992). This act is known as *interdiscursivity*, one of the two known discursive strategies often adopted during the productive process of a discourse.

According to Fairclough (1989; 1992), the interdiscursive strategy is one which is used by the discourse-producer in order to draw upon or evoke certain already-existing discourses for the primary purpose of producing a new discursive text. Thus, clearly implied here is the author's conscious decision to select certain discourses by dismissing others. This is done by the discourse-maker to enable him/her to serve or entertain his/her specific ideological objective.

The discourse-producer shall choose to use only ideas, themes, topics or contents encountered in certain discourses which are clearly in line with his/her ideological intention. It is not surprising, therefore, that the discursive text thus produced shall often be filled with numerous discursive elements deriving from the already-existing discourses. Similarly, s/he may also draw upon certain generic conventions which strongly support his/her ideological goal. The aim is to make the target audience read in a specific way and, subsequently, embrace *only* one particular interpretation.

In addition to referring to the already-existing discourses, however, the discourse-maker may also decide to recycle, either directly or indirectly, certain parts of them. This act of making use of certain textual elements from already-existing texts is known as *intertextuality*. However, unlike interdiscursivity which works implicitly, intertextuality works explicitly.

However, it is important to realize that, prior to the production of a discursive text, numerous other texts may have already emerged or existed. These texts by earlier authors can be quite numerous, indeed. As such, they often form a larger network of texts some of which the author may select to use for the production of a future text (see Fairclough, 1992; Paltridge, 2012).

In such a multiple-textual environment, the discourse-producer may either consciously or sub-consciously borrow or recycle various textual bits and pieces from the prior texts. Some excerpts or quotes associated with certain patterns of social relations, social norms and conventions, ideologies, value systems, and institutional rules may often be recycled by the author in the production of his/her discursive text. This intertextual strategy would enable the author to incorporate those elements for producing a hybridized text (Fairclough, 1989; 1992; 2009).

## CONCLUSION

To sum up, it is clear that to produce a discursive text is never the same as to put together freely-available units of language expecting them to readily turn into a discursive text. In fact, for a discursive text to come into being the abovementioned interplay between the sociocultural contexts, the discourse-producer and the discourse community concerned is required. In addition to that, only by drawing upon or recycling certain sociocultural assumptions or prejudices found in the already-existing discourses or texts, the discourse-producer can really expect to produce a discursive text which takes the side of its discourse community.

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