DISCOURSE

Sara Mills

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The term 'discourse' has a wider range of possible interpretations than any other term in literary and cultural theory, yet it is often the least satisfactorily defined within theoretical texts.

Discourse draws upon a variety of literary and non-literary texts to illustrate the myriad uses of the term throughout history. In this clear and helpful analysis, Sara Mills discusses the ways that feminists, discourse analysts, critical discourse analysts and post-colonial discourse theorists have appropriated the term developed by Michel Foucault for use in other contexts, and contrasts this to the way the term has been used by linguists. She provides some straightforward working definitions of this complex term.

With a new glossary and suggestions for further reading, and consideration of new research on the subject, this updated edition is the essential guide to the concept of discourse for students of literary theory.

Sara Mills is a Research Professor in the School of Cultural Studies, Sheffield Hallam University. She has published work on feminist linguistic and literary theory and feminist post-colonial theory, and she is the author of a Routledge Critical Thinkers volume on *Michel Foucault* (2003).

THE NEW CRITICAL IDIOM

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SERIES EDITOR'S PREFACE

The New Criticial Idiom is a series of introductory books which seeks to extend the lexicon of literary terms, in order to address the radical changes which have taken place in the study of literature during the last decades of the twentieth century. The aim is to provide clear, well-illustrated accounts of the full range of terminology currently in use, and to evolve histories of its changing usuage.

The current state of the discipline of literary studies is one where there is considerable debate concerning basic questions of terminology. This involves, among other things, the boundaries which distinguish the literary from the non-literary; the position of literatures of different cultures; and questions concerning the relation literary to other cultural forms within the context of interdisciplinary studies.

It is clear that the field of literary critcism and theory is a dynamic and heterogeneous one. The present need is for individual volumes on terms which combine clarity of exposition with an adventurousness of perspective and breadth of application. Each volume will contain as part of its apparatus some indication of the direction in which the definition of particular terms is likely to move, as well as expanding the disciplinary boundaries within which some of these terms have been traditionally contained. This will involve some re-situation of terms within the larger field of cultural representation, and will introduce examples from the area of film and the modern media in addition to examples from a variety of literary texts.

Acknowledgements

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INTRODUCTION

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. 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 enmeshed, 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 partly 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. This book aims to try to map out the theoretical contexts 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's 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 Leech 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)

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 Fowler 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 Foucault 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 which have meaning and which have some effects in the real world, count as discourse.[1] 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'. I 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, whilst 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.[2] For example, Mikhail Bakhtin 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.

As I mentioned above, 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, as I discuss in Chapters 4 and 5, 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. This book is concerned with demarcating the boundaries of the meanings of discourse, and in the chapters which follow I will be concerned with three contexts of usage, broadly speaking: cultural theory, linguistics and critical discourse analysis/social psychology. But perhaps it may be useful here to sketch out in a schematic way the range of definitions and the contexts within which they occur, before going on to analyse these in more detail.

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, as I noted above, a discourse can be taken to 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 mainstream 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 (Brown and Yule, 1983). 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 (Sinclair and Coulthard, 1975; Carter and Simpson, 1989). 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.[3] 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 (Wetherell and Potter, 1992; Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 1995). 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 (Fairclough, 1992b; Wodak, 1998; Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 1999; Thornborrow, 2002). This fusion of linguistics and cultural theory has inevitably resulted in an overlaying of the meanings of discourse from both fields.

This book is mainly focused on how Michel Foucault's ideas on discourse have been integrated into various disciplines in different ways, but I also focus on the way that other theorists' definitions of discourse challenge and sometimes modify his uses of the term. I will now turn, therefore, to a brief discussion of his work, together with a discussion of Michel Pecheux's theorisation of discourse. I then consider the way that literature might usefully be seen as a discourse, drawing on Foucault's work. This will be followed in Chapters 2 and 3 by more detailed examinations of the uses to which Foucault put the term. In Chapters 4 and 5, I will examine the modifications which cultural theorists, particularly those working within feminist theory and colonial and post-colonial discourse theory, have made to his work and the way that they put the term discourse to work in analysis. Chapter 6 then analyses the way that discourse has had different trajectories in terms of how it has worked out its meanings within discourse analysis, social psychology and Critical Discourse analysis, and I will discuss here the sometimes heated debates that there have been about the definition and scope of discourse.

CULTURAL THEORY AND MODELS OF DISCOURSE

Whilst Michel Foucault is one of the theorists most often referred to when discussing the term discourse, as Diane Macdonnell has shown, there are a number of other theorists whose work on discourse is important (Macdonnell, 1986). Macdonnell discusses in detail the differences between the definitions developed by Michel Foucault, Barry Hindess and Paul Hirst, Louis Althusser and Valentin Voloshinov/Mikhail Bakhtin. 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