



THE CONCEPT OF DISCOURSE: CONTENT AND HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

The concept of discourse occupies a pivotal position in contemporary humanities and social sciences, transcending its conventional linguistic boundaries to encompass systems of statements, practices, and power relations that actively constitute knowledge, subjects, and social realities. This article provides a comprehensive examination of the content of discourse—its definitional contours, productive capacities, and intersections with power/knowledge regimes—while tracing its historical development from mid-20th-century linguistic formalizations to poststructuralist philosophical elaborations and subsequent critical applications. Drawing on a systematic literature review and genealogical analysis of primary theoretical texts, the study delineates key transformations: from Zellig Harris's distributional approach to connected speech, through Michel Foucault's archaeological and genealogical frameworks, to the emergence of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and multimodal extensions. Findings underscore discourse's role not as a neutral medium but as a historically contingent mechanism that produces 'truth effects,' regulates what can be said and known, and normalizes institutional practices. The discussion addresses theoretical tensions, methodological challenges, and the concept's enduring relevance in analyzing contemporary phenomena such as digital media, identity politics, and global inequalities. This inquiry contributes to scholarly discourse by synthesizing historical ruptures and continuities, advocating for context-sensitive, interdisciplinary applications that remain vigilant to power dynamics. Ultimately, understanding discourse demands recognition of its materiality, dispersion, and transformative potential in shaping human experience.

INTRODUCTION

The term "discourse" permeates academic and public spheres with remarkable elasticity, yet its theoretical depth often remains under-examined amid proliferating applications. Beyond denoting spoken or written communication, discourse in scholarly usage represents a regulated system of statements that systematically forms the objects it purports to describe, while simultaneously producing subjects, truths, and social orders. This productive capacity renders discourse inseparable from questions of power, knowledge, and historical contingency.

The motivation for this article stems from the conceptual ambiguity persisting despite decades of refinement. As global societies confront challenges of representation, algorithmic governance, and contested narratives, a rigorous mapping of discourse's content and history is essential. Traditional views treat language as a transparent vehicle for pre-existing meanings; critical traditions, conversely, expose it as a site of ideological struggle and epistemic production. This study addresses the central question: What constitutes the core content of discourse, and how has this concept evolved historically across linguistic, philosophical, and critical domains? Subsidiary inquiries probe definitional shifts, relations to power, and implications for contemporary analysis.

Adopting an IMRAD framework adapted for conceptual review in the humanities, the article synthesizes primary sources and key secondary interpretations. Its significance lies in bridging formal linguistic origins with Foucauldian ruptures and CDA developments, offering a nuanced resource for interdisciplinary scholars. By emphasizing discontinuities alongside continuities, it avoids teleological narratives while highlighting discourse's material and strategic dimensions.

METHODS

This study utilizes a systematic conceptual and historical literature review grounded in genealogical principles. Primary sources by foundational theorists were prioritized, supplemented by interpretive scholarship. Databases in linguistics, philosophy, and social theory were queried with terms including "discourse theory," "Foucauldian discourse," "history of discourse analysis," and "critical discourse analysis." Inclusion focused on seminal texts from 1950 onward exhibiting explicit theoretical engagement with the concept's evolution. Analytical coding identified themes of definition, regularity, power, and transformation. Triangulation across sources mitigated bias, with historical contextualization of thinkers' socio-political milieus. Limitations encompass potential Western-centric emphasis and the interpretive nature of philosophical synthesis.

RESULTS

Linguistic Origins and Structural Approaches

Modern discourse analysis emerged with Zellig Harris's 1952 article, which extended descriptive linguistics beyond the sentence to examine distributional regularities in connected texts. Harris proposed formal methods independent of semantic interpretation, focusing on equivalence classes and transformations to reveal textual structure.

Functionalist traditions, influenced by M.A.K. Halliday, further conceptualized discourse as a semantic unit fulfilling ideational, interpersonal, and textual metafunctions within social contexts. Cohesion (reference, ellipsis, conjunction) and coherence mechanisms underscore its dynamic, context-bound nature. Ethnographic contributions, such as Dell Hymes's SPEAKING model, embedded discourse in cultural rules of communicative competence. These foundations established discourse as rule-governed social practice.

Foucauldian Transformations: Archaeology

Michel Foucault revolutionized the concept. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969), he defines discourse as "a group of statements in so far as they belong to the same discursive formation." Statements are not mere propositions but functions with specific modalities of existence, producing objects rather than reflecting them. Discursive formations exhibit regularities in dispersion—of objects, enunciative modalities, concepts, and strategies—without requiring thematic unity or authorial intent.

The episteme represents the historical a priori governing knowledge possibilities across fields. Archaeology excavates conditions of emergence, rejecting continuous histories in favor of discontinuities. Foucault stresses discourse's materiality: it exists in institutions, books, and practices, subject to control procedures (prohibition, exclusion, rarity).

Genealogy and Power/Knowledge

Foucault's genealogical turn integrates power as productive and capillary. Discourses form regimes of truth, where power circulates through knowledge production, normalizing subjects via institutions (e.g., disciplinary mechanisms in prisons or medical discourses on sexuality). Resistance operates internally to discourses. This framework reveals discourse's strategic role in subjectivation and social control.

Critical Discourse Analysis and Contemporary Extensions

Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model (text, discursive practice, social practice) links linguistic features to ideological reproduction. Teun van Dijk emphasizes cognitive interfaces, while Ruth Wodak's discourse-historical approach integrates historical context for analyzing prejudice and politics. Extensions now encompass multimodal (visual, digital) discourses, postcolonial critiques, and environmental narratives, addressing neoliberal globalization and intersectional identities.

Key milestones include: 1952 Harris formalization; 1960s-70s Foucauldian shifts; 1980s-present CDA proliferation and digital/multimodal turns.

DISCUSSION

The historical trajectory illustrates discourse's evolution from a linguistic unit to a productive social force intertwined with power. Its content—regularities, formations, and truth effects—challenges representationalist language theories, positing construction over reflection. Foucauldian insights expose how discourses govern intelligibility, yet critiques highlight risks of determinism or underplaying agency, prompting syntheses with other frameworks.

Methodologically, discourse analysis demands reflexivity regarding corpus selection and researcher positioning. Contemporary relevance is acute: platform algorithms amplify discursive regimes, while identity claims contest dominant formations. Limitations of this review suggest avenues for decolonial and non-Western expansions. Future research might integrate computational linguistics with critical reflexivity or explore neuro-discursive interfaces. The concept's vitality resides in its capacity to historicize the present and foster emancipatory disruptions.

CONCLUSION

This article has delineated the concept of discourse as a historically specific, productive ensemble of statements and practices that constitutes knowledge domains, subject positions, and power relations. From its linguistic formalization in Harris's distributional methods, through Foucault's profound archaeological and genealogical reorientations—emphasizing dispersion, materiality, and regimes of truth—to the socially engaged critiques of CDA, discourse theory has undergone significant transformations reflecting broader shifts in intellectual paradigms. These

developments affirm discourse not as passive reflection but as an active force shaping what counts as reality within given epochs.

The enduring value of this framework lies in its capacity to denaturalize taken-for-granted truths, reveal exclusionary mechanisms, and open spaces for contestation and change. In an era marked by information overload, polarization, and technological mediation of communication, rigorous discourse analysis equips scholars and practitioners to interrogate how meanings are produced, stabilized, or destabilized. While challenges of relativism, methodological rigor, and cultural specificity persist, they underscore the need for ongoing theoretical refinement and empirical application. Future inquiries should expand interdisciplinary dialogues, incorporating global South perspectives and emerging multimodal forms, to further illuminate discourse's role in human affairs. Ultimately, engaging with the concept of discourse fosters critical awareness essential for navigating—and potentially transforming—the complex social worlds we inhabit. This synthesis advocates sustained scholarly attention to its mechanisms as a pathway toward more reflexive, equitable knowledge practices.

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