Defining Discourse

Discourse researchers believe that language is not merely reflective of social realities. It does not simply describe the nature of the world and function as a vehicle for conveying people’s ideas, feelings and experiences. Rather, there is a belief that language is constructive. That is, discourse researchers believe that words don’t just describe the world, instead the world described “comes into existence at that moment” (Wetherell, 2001, p. 16). Texts, such as interviews, newspaper articles, official documents, television talk shows, Internet data are “constructed in ways which make things happen and which bring social worlds into being” (Ibid. p. 16).

1.

Sachs (2001) cites Clarke and Newman (1997), when she says, “Discourses offer particular kinds of subject position and identity through which people come to view their relationships with different loci of power” (p.151). In this conception of Discourse, language is important for defining what relationship people have with power. That is, people who wield power use language in different ways from those who do not have as much power (in specific social situations). That use of language is like a badge or marker of a person’s identity and social position. Inability or unwillingness to use language that marks one’s (subordinate) position in a social situation can, for example, lead to serious consequences for the subordinate person. A good example of this would be if a school principal directs a teacher to act in a particular way, and though the instruction is a legal and reasonable one, the teacher adopts a defiant attitude and his/her language expresses insubordination. This will be a case where the power imbalance between the two persons does not permit the lower ranked person to use language without inviting negative consequences.

2.

In *An introduction to discourse analysis* Gee (1999) proposed two central types of discourse: 1. Discourse with a big ‘D’, and 2. “little d” discourse. He defined the latter as language- in- use, which enables us to enact identities and activities in particular sites. These can be speeches, use of metaphors, declarations, attestations and other types of speech acts. In order to enact an identity as a classroom teacher of chemistry, for example, you absolutely must use the language of the subject [its jargon]. Similarly, to enact an identity as a supportive colleague in this diploma programme you may express sympathy for a classmate who loses all her data when her computer crashes [and she is heart-broken because she didn’t heed my advice and backup her work in a million places], or offer congratulations to her when she plans a brilliant lesson and your supervisor is all smiles. By offering these [sympathy and congratulations] you bring into being the person of a “caring” and supportive peer. It’s an identity you enact and it is manifested through your words.

Gee (1999) notes, though, that words are rarely sufficient to enact all identities and activities. When people “meld” language- in- use or “little d” with what he calls non-language “stuff” in order to perform identities and activities then “big D” Discourses are involved. For example, to fully enact the identity of a knowledgeable chemistry teacher, you would need to use the jargon of the subject, demonstrate how to manipulate laboratory apparatus, and have a chemist’s perspective on the physical world. If all the chemistry teachers in your department at school X hate poetry and drink green tea out of test tubes as a sort of bizarre lunch time ritual then you MUST conform to those non-language practices and beliefs if you are to participate in the specific Discourse of being a chemistry teacher at school X. The “little d” would be merely your use of language as a chemist; “big D” would be your use of chemistry jargon PLUS participation in the other rituals and subscribing to the beliefs of other chemistry teachers.

**Here is another example**: a major Discourse in contemporary education centers on gender and achievement. The basic position that has arisen, and is arising, is of male underachievement and female “super” achievement. This is generally compared to the historical trend of male domination of education, and the concomitant establishment of male hegemony and power in the workplace. How does a Discourse of male underachievement arise?

* Statistical data in education, sociology, and economics. These offer “empirical” evidence of declining achievement.
* Voluminous educational and sociological research documenting case studies of “marginalized” males and the rise of “empowered” females.
* Stories of the rise of youth crime [by males]
* Political speeches about the need to “do something” about our “boys”
* Newspaper articles about the phenomenon.
* Employers’ associations’ pronouncements.

All of this talk constitutes a Discourse about the activity of being an ‘underachieving male’, and very importantly, how that identity has a negative impact upon society.

Other national Discourses:

* Equal opportunity
* Single sex versus co-ed schooling
* Rural students’ under-performance
* Teacher quality
* Superiority of Standard English [SE] over Trinidad Creole
* School inclusion

At school level, there are local Discourses:

* The “good” student
* The well-rounded” student
* Efficacy/usefulness of school uniforms
* To beat or not to beat?

“Small d” discourse

* Classroom language in specific subjects
* Language use in staff rooms
* Adolescents’ language as they negotiate identities amongst each other
* Constructivism: one of the biggest Discourses in contemporary education
* Why would you want to participate in a Discourse?

**Required reading**

Gee, J.P. Discourse, small-d; Big D. Download from: <http://jamespaulgee.com/pdfs/Big%20D,%20Small%20d.pdf>