

1

Language as Social Action



Chapter Outline

- 1.1 Language and Society 4
- 1.2 Language as a Resource 7
- Takeaways 10
- Discussion Points 11
- References 11

In this chapter, we introduce the intertwined relationship between language, action, and society. We see this relationship as a continuum rather than a separate system of micro and macro levels, as it is often regarded. Furthermore, we approach this relationship through two central and opposing forces: stasis and change. This approach allows us to examine both the rules, norms, and practices that regulate and govern language use, as well as the variations and changes that occur over time. Language can not only be used within established norms and rules but also be used alternatively to bend and break the rules and norms to create something new. In addition, language is also regulated and renewed by wider social, cultural and political processes. This dynamic interaction between language and society is the core focus in discourse studies.

Key Concepts in This Chapter: *Discourse, Language as a resource, Power, Social constructivism*

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1.1 Language and Society

Discourse studies build on the fundamental idea that language is a form of social action. This means that rather than seeing language as a vehicle for communication or a window into the world, we see language as *a way of doing things in the world*. Seeing language as a social action draws our attention to the power of language: when, how, and why it matters if, for example, we are categorised as native speakers of a particular language, if new terms are used to refer to gender and sexuality or if a particular accent is described as desirable or dangerous. The large financial investments used to manage brands of international products and political campaigns demonstrate the power of language. The recent global COVID-19 pandemic reminded us of the need for reliable information and the challenges of producing accurate and understandable knowledge about something completely new and constantly evolving. Language, power, and society are intertwined, and in this book, we will explore this relationship by drawing on seminal work on discourse and power by Michel Foucault (1972/1989, 1980) and Norman Fairclough (1992).

The *relationship between language and society* is at the core of discourse studies. This is what the concept of discourse tries to capture: in discourse studies, discourse refers to a theoretical view of language as social action. In practice, this means examining *language-in-action* in a wide range of social situations. The range of these situations can vary from a single interaction event, like a job interview or a presidential speech, to wide social, political and historical circumstances at a given time, like the construction of knowledge and evolving discourses about the COVID-19 pandemic. Regardless of the situation, the fundamental rationale for discourse studies lies in the understanding that language and society are deeply interconnected. Every instance of language use is shaped by broader social practices and structures and vice versa, every instance of language use contributes in constructing wider social practices and structures. Therefore, it is essential to examine *both* the specific use of language *and* the wider social context in which language is used, paying particular attention to how they influence and interact with one another.

Seeing language as social action underlines its *power*: Language is a key element in constructing meanings, generating knowledge, and shaping identities. It can be a clue that creates a sense of belonging, yet simultaneously, it can be used to exclude and discriminate. The social situation can both limit and enable what we can do with language.

The dynamic interplay between language use and social situation (time and place) forms the core premises for discourse studies: how we use language impacts the topic under discussion as well as the relationship between the speaker and the listener. The same applies the other way around: the interactive situation and the broader societal context influence the possibilities, preferences and potential challenges in language use. Social actions and language use vary according to the situation, time, place and interactional goals.

The dynamics of language use opens up an interesting question for discourse analysts: what choices are possible (or not) for language users in a given situation and what are the consequences of the choices made? These choices are enabled and constrained by linguistic, discursive and social systems in the given situation. In addition, social situations and actions are embedded in historically formed norms and ideologies that shape language choices.

One central way to examine the relationship between language and society in discourse studies is to focus on meanings: what kinds of meanings are constructed in a given situation and what are the conditions and consequences of the meaning-making. The motivation is not so much in finding the most 'truthful' version of a given phenomenon or event as it is in understanding the relative weight of the different versions of the issue at hand. By asking which meanings are dominant, marginal or missing and why the core interest of discourse studies in the intertwined relationships between language, knowledge and power becomes evident.

The emphasis on the relationship between language, power and knowledge links back to the theoretical view of seeing language as social action. Within the field of language studies, this view originates from traditions that emphasise the functional nature of language and its social context. The foundations of these approaches can be traced to early functional linguistics, sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology. From these perspectives, language is not only a linguistic system but also a discursive and social system. Consequently, language is organised not only according to the inherent rules of grammar but also – and emphatically so – according to discursive and social norms, values and rules. In short, language is dynamic: previous norms are stretched, old rules are forgotten and new ways of using language emerge for new situations and purposes.

The relationship between language and the surrounding society is multi-level, dynamic and deeply intertwined. The ways in which language use is regulated and organised is inherently social. This means that studying language provides us insights about society, culture, time and place in which it exists – and vice versa. Understanding this basic idea is essential for discourse studies. A discourse researcher examines language to know more about society and culture, rather than focusing solely on the language itself. This research perspective is the cornerstone of discourse research and defines its research object and theoretical perspectives: language as social action by individuals in a given time and place.

It is through language that we tell about ourselves and describe others and pass on traditions and histories. We use language to act as parents, spouses, students and employees; to negotiate holiday plans; to make a term paper; to defend our rights and to resist norms. Through language, we enjoy literature, follow world politics and entertain ourselves in front of the screen. Language is the cohesive force that binds us into communities. As language use is a social activity, language users also become social actors with particular roles, opportunities and resources to act, exercise power, resist and reform and negotiate social relations and dynamics. Consequently, discourse studies focus on how language



shapes us, how we shape language and how language operates in various contexts.

In discourse studies, we are interested in studying language as it is used in everyday life across various contexts: when we talk with our friends, write a thesis or read the latest social media messages. But this is not the whole story. We are also interested in examining the wider social, historical and political contexts of language use: the enduring power relations and prevailing or marginalised ideologies and identities.

This means that we see language – the visible and audible materiality of language use, such as texts, speeches, advertisements and graffiti – as inherently connected to broader temporal and situational processes and structures. In discourse studies, the small and big are intertwined: even a small instance of language use (e.g., an identity category and the name of language or country) is linked to the social, political, economic and historical processes of the situation. This is, in short, what it means that discourse examines the dynamic relationship between language and society.

Language varies across different situations, with each context both limiting and enabling language variation. Language use is governed by specific conditions, norms and consequences. For example, the language a job applicant employs during an interview can influence their chances of securing the position, while the interview setting itself impacts the applicant's language use. Social actions are also language actions. Domains such as politics, law, education and knowledge production are all produced, interpreted and appropriated through language.

Language and society have a reciprocal relationship: they influence each other. Language tells us about time, place, norms and conventions, but at the same time it can influence and change them. For the discourse researcher, the relationship between language use and context is thus two-way and dynamic.

Discourse studies can be described as an overlapping and intersecting network that encompasses language in all its details – dots and commas and all – as well as broad social processes and structures, such as knowledge production, gender categorisation and education ideologies. Everything matters, both big and small. On the one hand, something that appears small at first glance can in fact tell us something very big. On the other hand, big abstract things materialise through language. A telling example is the name choice for a country historically referred to as Burma but known as Myanmar since 1989. Both names refer to the same geographical location, but the choice of the name in different contexts encapsulates a major political statement and an ideological standpoint. The choice of name can also tell us about the relationship between language and historical context. A casual observer of events in the region may be surprised to find that Burma no longer appears on more recent maps but has been replaced by Myanmar. Another observer might not recognise Burma from history books and on old maps and may not associate it with the present-day Myanmar. Both – the small and the big – are present simultaneously. For discourse analysts, this is an interesting topic of research.



The relationship between language and society is under constant construction and development. As the ways in which language is used changes and varies, for example, related to mobility, new technological affordances or changes in political economy, research on this relationship requires on-going theoretical and methodological development. Below, we discuss one recent conceptualisation, namely the view of language as a resource (see Section 1.2). In the following chapters, we discuss concepts such as indexicality, assemblage and rhizome, which attempt to capture the processual and multidimensional relationship between language and society. Established concepts in discourse studies, such as discourses, genres, hybridity and intertextuality, are also reviewed and updated by discourse scholars to meet the needs of current research. These theoretical concepts are tools for thinking which we can use to examine the relationship between language and society in a way that simultaneously roots us with the previous research and develops new insights. Theoretical concepts help us navigate and articulate our understanding of this relationship and guide us in our research to learn more about this dynamic interplay.

The rationale for discourse studies stems from *social constructivism*. It is a broad sociological theory with a premise that reality is constructed through human activity, with language playing a crucial role. Gaining prominence since the 1980s, constructivism unites various research lines focused on construction of the social world. It introduced a shift, known as the *linguistic turn*, that marked at the time a move away from experimental and quantitative research towards using language and semiotic systems to create meaning, build communities and identities and organise social practices. This shift also launched the on-going expansion of discourse studies. Today, discourse studies is a multidisciplinary field of study with strong links to, for example, sociolinguistics, ethnography, multimodal studies, materiality and post-humanist studies.

1.2 Language as a Resource

One way to examine language as social action and to highlight the reciprocal relationship between language and society is to consider language as a flexible and malleable *resource* that allows and requires language users to make *choices*. There is nothing inherent in language itself that would force you to use it in any particular way. For example, it is your choice of the terms like *climate change*, *climate crises*, *global warming* and *extreme weather events* you use to refer to the same phenomenon and its consequences. This freedom of choice, however, is constrained by a number of social factors, including context, discursive and interactional practices of the context and their respective rules. In addition, how you use language depends on your skills and personal preferences.

The concept of language as a resource is perhaps easy to understand by thinking about our own language skills in languages that we are learning. In some situations, our resources offer us a range of choices for interaction, while in others our ability to communicate is concretely limited by our linguistic skills.

This same principle applies to all languages we use. Furthermore, the perspective of language as a resource emphasises that language is not only a linguistic system but also discursive and social, as discussed above. As a result, from the resource perspective, language use consists of an array of different linguistic and semiotic resources from different languages (Finnish, Korean, Swahili and sign language) to different varieties of particular languages (dialects and registers) and from different genres (term paper, email, and Instagram post) to discourses (clear water either as a human right or an economic product). As language users, we navigate between these different resources with their rules, norms and practices. We choose and compose our situated language use as a combination of our resources, goals and the norms of a given situation. We all have our own language repertoire that is continuously developed and tested in social situations.

The idea of language as a resource has been influenced not only by functional theories of language but also by a dialogic approach, which emphasises the multi-layered and dynamic nature of language (Bakhtin 1981). This dialogic understanding of language was most notably promoted by the Russian literary theorist *Mikhail Bakhtin* (1895–1975). He stressed the idea that each expression (e.g., text or utterance) is simultaneously both unique and a part of a historical continuum. This continuum is formed by past language use that, in turn, influences future language use. This principle applies to a single expression or a conversation as well as entire texts, discourses and genres. Language emerges from several simultaneous, parallel and intersecting resources. Among these, language users make their choices, embedding themselves in a network of previous uses of language, thus becoming part of this continuum.

For discourse analysts, this kind of dialogical and functional view of language as a resource opens up interesting and important research questions: What kind of choices are made at the level of linguistic systems of meaning (grammar, structures and vocabulary) as well as the levels of discursive and social systems of meaning (e.g., discourses or genres and identities or power)? What kind of choices are available to language users in a given situation and what are the consequences of these choices, for example, in terms of knowledge production, subject positions and categories for identities, participation and agency?



Functional View on Language: Different Choices – Different Meanings

When analysing the linguistic micro-level elements, many discourse researchers use the systemic-functional theory of language developed originally by the linguist M.A.K. Halliday (1925–2018). Essential to the Hallidayan view is the idea that language has several simultaneous functions and that language as a system offers us different possibilities of choice,



that is, linguistic resources, with which meanings can be created in different situations. The different choices thus make different meanings possible. However, these choices and meanings are not random but are ordered according to context and social action. This idea resonates also with much of the discourse studies that draw their inspiration from work by Dell Hymes (1927–2009) and Erving Goffman (1922–1982).

Further Reading

Goffman, E. (1974). *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Gumperz, J.J. and Hymes, D.H. (1986). *Directions in Sociolinguistics: The Ethnography of Communication* (ed. J.J. Gumperz and D. Hymes). Reissued with corrections and additions. Oxford: Blackwell.

Halliday, M.A.K. and Matthiessen, C.M.I.M. (2013). *Halliday's Introduction to Functional Grammar* (rev. C.M.I.M. Matthiessen). 4th edition. London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

In practice, the range of choices available to us means that we can describe the same event or phenomenon using these resources in different ways – through different expressions, linguistic structures, genres, styles and discourses. Each choice, such as deciding between the terms *climate crisis*, *climate change* and *global warming* opting for a humoristic or preachy tone, constructs meaning and creates a different account of both the subject matter and the language users in that situation. Each choice carries with it the historical traces of previous contexts and ways of using it. For instance, the use of a regional dialect can have multiple meanings, such as regional identity, social class, humour or authenticity. At the same time, the historical use of that particular dialect may not (at least yet) have imbued it with meanings like ‘refinement’ or ‘civilised’. It is important to remember that language varieties now considered as ‘standard’ have themselves developed from dialects as a result of historical and political processes. The meanings attached to a particular dialect can be evoked for specific particular goals. For example, local products can be authenticated for global tourism markets through the use of local dialect, and a spokesperson of an international mining company might use a regional dialect in a press conference to establish a connection with the local audience.

While we can make multiple choices regarding language use, language is not an entirely unconstrained resource. It is subject to various restrictions and norms as the relationship between language and society is dynamic and powerful. The choices by the language users are limited by the context: the abundance of choices is narrowed down by other language users in the situation, as well as by norms, values, political ideologies and institutional routines – in short, by the whole society. As a result, language use is not only a matter of the choices and values or idiosyncrasy of the individual language user; it is embedded in a particular time, culture, society and institutions. In this way, every instance of language use contributes to the sense-making of what is happening and why. This process is grounded in a key theoretical idea in discourse studies: language

use is always situational, embedded in wider social, historical, political and cultural processes.

The dynamic relationship between language and context is thus two-way: we use language to construct our world while the world (context) impacts our use of language. This resonates with the principles of social constructionism discussed above: we construct and convey our reality through interaction of linguistic, discursive and social systems. Thus, discourse studies is not merely interested in examination of language in isolation but as firmly embedded in the social context: social structures, power relationships, institutional norms and political processes. This is why in discourse studies our key theoretical claim is that language is socially organised and that it has power. The focus is simultaneously on the macro-level big picture and on the micro-level small details. This interrelatedness of matters big and small requires discourse researchers to have knowledge of both language and society. Consequently, *interdisciplinarity* is a defining feature of discourse studies. Since discourse researchers are interested in the social, political and historical contexts of language use, as well as in the power of language in social change, their research draws on and contributes to social and cultural studies and theories, in addition to language studies.

Takeaways

Language is a form of social action. It is not merely a natural vehicle for communication or a window into the world. Through language, we do things in the world.

Language and society are deeply interconnected. Every instance of language use is shaped by wider social practices and structures.

By asking which meanings are dominant, marginal or missing and why the core interest of discourse studies in the intertwined relationships between language, knowledge and power becomes evident.

Language users' choices are limited by the context: they are limited by norms, values, political ideologies and institutional routines.

A discourse researcher examines language to know more about society and culture, rather than focusing solely on the language itself.

The key theoretical claim in discourse studies is that language and society are entangled and as a consequence language matters: it has power and it is socially organised. This focus requires attention both to the big picture and to the small details. Therefore, discourse researchers need to have knowledge of both language and society.

Discussion Points

1. Consider the relationship between language and society in practice. Can you think of a phenomenon that can be referred to by different expressions or where the choice of expression or term has political significance or consequences?
2. Think about situations where you have experienced that your own linguistic resources have not been sufficient. What kind of situations have they been? Was there something new in the social activity or the context, or was the experience related to the language(s), register or dialect used? What do you think was the reason for your experience?
3. Think of situations where you have paid attention to a particular linguistic choice and thought it was not suitable for the situation. Consider why you think the choice was not appropriate. Was it related to the situation or its participants, the genre or, for example, the broader social context? Consider why the choice was made.

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