Discourse, small-d, Big D

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Abstract

The notion of "Big 'D' Discourse" ("Discourse" spelled with a capital "D") is meant to capture the ways in which people enact and recognize socially and historically significant identities or "kinds of people" through well-integrated combinations of language, actions, interactions, objects, tools, technologies, beliefs, and values. The notion stresses how "discourse" (language in use among people) is always also a "conversation" among different historically formed Discourses (that is, a "conversation" among different socially and historically significant kinds of people or social groups). The notion of "Big 'D' Discourse" sets a larger context for the analysis of "discourse" (with a little "d"), that is, the analysis of language in use.

People often believe that language is a tool primarily for saying things, for giving information. But, in reality, language is a tool for three things: saying, doing, and being. When we speak or write we simultaneously say something ("inform"), do something (act), and are something (be). When we listen or read we have to know what the speaker or writer is saying, doing, and being in order to fully understand (Gee 1999).

If a teacher in a math class says "Mary, what do you think?" this could be a test question on the basis of which Mary will be graded, assessed, or judged. It could be an attempt to start a class discussion where the teacher cares more about how Mary thinks and the discussion that thinking can start than she does about grades.

It can be crucial to Mary to know which is which. Misunderstanding the question (e.g., as an invitation to take a risk and elaborate when in reality it is a test question) can be consequential. Note that in a case like this, Mary and the other students judge what the question really means based on their knowledge of the practices, values, and identities acted out in classroom and expected by this teacher and school. Is the teacher an assessor (be) grading students (do) or is she a discussion facilitator (be) facilitating talk in interaction (do)? Is she a traditional teacher or a more progressive teacher? It takes "social knowledge" to understand and to respond "appropriately".

Paulo Freire (1995, org. 1968) long ago pointed out that understanding language (in any useful way) requires understanding the world. Reading the word requires reading the world. To understand what is being said in any deep way we need to know what speakers or writers are trying to do. This requires us to know about social practices and genres of activity in the world. To understand what is being said (and done) also requires that we understand who the speaker or writer is trying to be, what socially significant identity or social role he or she is trying to "pull off". This requires us to know about the social identities, roles, and groups that make up a society (or a classroom for that matter).

One and the same person could speak and act as a street-gang member, an honor student in school, and a hip-hop fan. In each case, the person will use different ways with words, that is, different styles or varieties of language, such as gang language, school-based formal language, or the language of hip-hop music and fandom. I call each of these different forms or varieties of language "social languages" (Gee 1999).

The language of law, physics, (video) gamers, mathematics, and biker bars are all social languages. There are a great many more. However, to "pull off" being a gang member, honor student, or hip-hop fan you need more than language. You have to get the words "right", of course: you have to "talk the talk". But you also have to get other things "right" as well. In each case you have to gesture and dress, and act and interact in the "right" ways. You also have to use the "right" things, tools, or "props" in the "right" ways at the "right" times and places (things like guns and graffiti, books and tests, and records and "DJing"). And, finally, you have to have or at least display the "right" sorts of values and beliefs. You have to "walk the walk" and integrate the "walk" with the "talk" in the "right" ways. You have to "pull off" a complex performance, where "pull off"—to be "right"—here means getting others to recognize and accept you (and what you are doing) as a gang member, honor student, or hip-hop fan at the

"right" times and places. Being recognized as something (e.g., a gang member, an honor student, a hip-hop fan) is often a contestable, negotiable, and context-sensitive thing (i.e., what works in one setting may not work in other settings).

Combinations of ways with words and ways with "other stuff" (bodies, clothes, objects, tools, actions, interactions, values, and beliefs) that can get people recognized as having certain socially significant identities, I have called "Discourses" with a "big D" (so, they are often called "big D Discourses").

To understand language—oral or written—is to understand social languages and Discourses, that is, to understand society and the groups that make it up in ever contestable ways. Social languages and Discourses are not boxes or tight categories. They interact with each other and contest with or align with each other in complex ways. They can change, blend, or die as they "struggle" with each other to make society and history. We can mix and match them, make new ones out of the pieces of old ones, or fight to keep them "pure".

We do not invent our language, we inherit it from others. We understand each other because we share conventions about how to use and interpret language. We can most certainly innovate within these conventions—create new words, give new meanings to old words, find new ways of saying things—but these innovations must be shared with others. The social groups with which we share conventions about how to use and interpret language are many and varied. These groups include cultures; ethnic groups; professions like doctors, lawyers, teachers, and carpenters; academic disciplines; interest-driven groups like bird watchers and video gamers; and organizations like street gangs, the military, and sports teams. There are yet many other sorts of social groups. Each of them has distinctive ways with words associated with distinctive identities and activities.

There is no one word for all these sorts of groups within which we humans act out distinctive identities and activities. People have tried various names for them: cultures (broadening the term), communities of practice, speech communities, discourse communities, activity systems, actor-actant networks, thought collectives, and others (e.g., professions and institutions). Each label is meant to capture just some such groups or just some aspects of such groups' practices (for references, see Gee 1999).

Gee (1990, see also Gee 1989, 1999) introduced the term "Discourse" with a capital "D" (so-called "big 'D' Discourses") for any such group and the ways in which such socially-based group conventions allow people to enact specific identities and activities. He used this term because such groups continue through time—for the most part, they were here before we arrived on earth and will be here after we leave—and we can see them as communicating ("discoursing") with each other through time and history, using us humans as their temporary mouthpieces. Gee used the term "discourse" (with a little "d") for any stretch of language in use.

Little "d" discourse analysis studies how the flow of language-in-use across time and the patterns and connections across this flow of language make sense and guide in interpretation. "Big 'D' Discourse" analysis embeds little "d" discourse analysis into the ways in which language melds with bodies and things to create society and history.

Discourses are about being "kinds of people" (Hacking, 1986). There are different ways to be an African-American or Latino. Thus, there are different kinds of African-Americans or any other cultural group. Being a policeman is to act out a kind of person. So is being a "tough cop", which is to talk and act as sub-kind of person within the kind of being a policeman. Being a SPED student ("Special Ed") is one way to be a kind of student, it is one kind of student. There are kinds within kinds.

Kinds of people appear in history and some disappear. At one time in history, in England and the United States, you could be recognized as a witch, if you "talked the talked" and "walked the walk" (and you might in some cases do so unintentionally). Now it is much harder to get recognized as a witch in many of the places where it was once much easier, though there are still places in the world where you can get recognized as a witch. That "kind of person" has pretty much disappeared in England and the United States.

While there is an endless array of Discourses in the world, nearly all human beings, except under extraordinary conditions, acquire an initial Discourse within whatever constitutes their primary socializing unit early in life. Early in life, we all learn a culturally distinctive way of being an "everyday person" as a member of our family and community. We can call this our "primary Discourse". Our primary Discourse gives us our initial and often enduring sense of self and sets the foundations of our culturally-specific vernacular language (our "everyday language"), the language in which we speak and act as "everyday" (non-specialized) people.

As a person grows up, lots of interesting things can happen to his or her primary Discourse. Primary Discourses can change, hybridize with other Discourses, and they can even die. In any case, for the vast majority of us, our primary Discourse, through all its transformations, serves us throughout life as what I (e.g., Gee 1990) have called our "lifeworld Discourse". Our lifeworld Discourse is the way that we use language, feel and think, act and interact, and so forth, in order to be an "everyday" (non- specialized) person. In our pluralistic world there is much adjustment and negotiation as people seek to meet in the terrain of the lifeworld, given that lifeworlds are culturally distinctive (that is, different groups of people have different ways of being-doing "everyday people").

All the Discourses we acquire later in life, beyond our primary Discourse, we acquire within a more "public sphere" than our initial socializing group. We can call these "secondary Discourses" (Gee 1990). They are acquired within institutions that are part and parcel of wider communities, whether these be religious groups, community organizations, schools, businesses, or governments. Secondary Discourses include the ways with words, things, and deeds we use in school, at church, in dealing with governmental institutions and courts of law, and in playing video games or engaging with citizen science.

As we are being socialized early in life, secondary Discourses very often play an interesting role. Primary Discourses work out, over time, alignments and allegiances with and against other Discourses, alignments and allegiances that shape them as they, in turn, shape these other Discourses.

One way that many social groups achieve an alignment with secondary Discourses they value is by incorporating certain aspects of the practices of these secondary Discourses into the early (primary Discourse) socialization of their children. For example, some African-American families incorporate aspects of practices and values that are part of African-American churches into their primary Discourse, as my family incorporated aspects of practices and values of a very traditional Catholicism into our primary Discourse. This is an extremely important mechanism in terms of which bits and pieces of a valued "community" or "public sphere" (to be more fully practiced later in the child's life) Discourse are incorporated as part and parcel of the child's "private", "home-based", lifeworld identity.

Social groups that are deeply affiliated with formal schooling often incorporate into the socialization of their children practices that resonate with later school-based secondary Discourses. For example, their children from an early age are encouraged (and coached) at dinner time to tell stories in quite expository ways that are rather like little essays, or parents interact with their children over books in ways that encourage a great deal of labeling and the answering of a variety of different types of questions, as well as the forming of intertextual relationships between books and between books and the world.

There are, of course, complex relationships between people's primary Discourses and the secondary ones they are acquiring, as well as among their academic, institutional, and community-based secondary Discourses. For example, children acquire a secondary Discourse when they go to school that involves the identity of being a student of a certain kind and using certain kinds of "school language". This identity and these forms of language can, at points, conflict with the identities, values, and ways with words some children have learned at home as part of their primary Discourse. For other children there is a much better fit or match.

Discourses can mix or be ambiguous. For example, an African-American running for office might, in a church, be speaking and acting from a mixture of a church Discourse—seeking to get recognized as a Christian of a certain sort—and a political Discourse—seeking to get recognized as a politician of a certain sort. Or there may be ambiguity about which Discourse is in play at which time. When people speak and act they are "bidding" to get recognized as a certain kind of person and the "bid" may not always be successful or the person may get recognized in different ways than he or she intended.

CROSS REFERENCES

Critical Discourse Analysis; Discourse Analysis; Identity Construction; Language and Social Interaction.

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