

Gee, James Paul.

Social Linguistics and Literacies:

Ideology in Discourses, Critical Perspectives on Literacy and Education;
London [England]: New York, 1990.

The moral of the above discussion is that at any moment we are using language we must say or write the right thing in the right way while playing the right social role and (appearing) to hold the right values, beliefs and attitudes. What is important is not language, and surely not grammar, but *saying (writing)-doing-being-valuing-believing combinations*. These combinations I will refer to as 'Discourses', with a capital 'D' ('discourse' with a little 'd', I will use for connected stretches of language that make sense, like conversations, stories, reports, arguments, essays; 'discourse' is part of 'Discourse' — 'Discourse' with a big 'D' is always more than just language). Discourses are ways of being in the world, or forms of life which integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, social identities, as well as gestures, glances, body positions and clothes.

A Discourse is a sort of 'identity kit' which comes complete with the appropriate costume and instructions on how to act, talk, and often write, so as to take on a particular social role that others will recognize. Imagine what an identity kit to play the role of Sherlock Holmes would involve: certain clothes, certain ways of using language (oral language and print), certain attitudes and beliefs, allegiance to a certain life style, and certain ways of interacting with others. We can call all these factors together, as they are integrated around the identity of 'Sherlock Holmes, Master Detective' the 'Sherlock Holmes Discourse'. This example also makes clear that 'Discourse', as I am using the term, does not involve just talk or just language.

Another way to look at Discourses is that they are always ways of displaying (through words, actions, values and beliefs) *membership* in a particular social group or

social network (people who associate with each other around a common set of interests, goals and activities). Being 'trained' as a linguist meant that I learned to speak, think and act like a linguist, and to recognize others when they do so (not just that I learned lots of facts about language and linguistics). So 'being a linguist' is one of the Discourses I have mastered.

Now, matters are not that simple: the larger Discourse of linguistics contains many sub-Discourses, different socially accepted ways of being a linguist. But the master Discourse is not just the sum of its parts; it is something over and above them. Every act of speaking, writing and behaving a linguist does as a linguist is meaningful only against the background of the whole social institution of linguistics, and that institution is made up of concrete things like people, books and buildings; abstract things like bodies of knowledge, values, norms and beliefs; mixtures of concrete and abstract things like universities, journals and publishers; as well as a shared history and shared stories.

Other examples of Discourses include: (enacting) being an American or a Russian, a man or a woman, a member of a certain socioeconomic class, a factory worker or a boardroom executive, a doctor or a hospital patient, a teacher, an administrator, or a student, a student of physics or a student of literature, a member of a sewing circle, a club, a street gang, a lunchtime social gathering, or a regular at a local bar. Discourses are always embedded in a medley of social institutions, and often involve various 'props' like books and magazines of various sorts, laboratories, classrooms, buildings of various sorts, various technologies, and a myriad of other objects from sewing needles (for sewing circles) through birds (for bird watchers) to basketball courts and basketballs (for basketball players). This latter point is important because many people mistake literacy for its 'props' and 'stage settings' (books, classrooms, training centers).

Yet another way to look at Discourses is as 'clubs' with (tacit) rules about who is a member and who is not, and (tacit) rules about how members ought to behave (if they wish to continue being accepted as members). Being a member of a family, a peer group, a community group or church, a drinking group, a classroom, a profession, a research team, an ethnic group, a sub-culture or a culture requires 'rites of passage' to enter the group, the maintenance of certain behaviors (ways of talking, valuing, thinking) to continue to be accepted as an 'insider', and continued 'tests' of membership applied by others.

Discourses

The term 'discourse' is used in many different ways in the literature in linguistics and literacy, so it is important to remember that I mean by 'Discourse' (with a capital 'D') what I have just said. I am giving a technical meaning to an old term which, unfortunately, already has a variety of other meanings.¹² I use the word as a *count* term ('a Discourse', 'Discourses', 'many Discourses'), not as a *mass* term ('Discourse', 'much Discourse'). To sum up, by 'a Discourse' I mean:

A *Discourse* is a socially accepted association among ways of using language, of thinking, feeling, believing, valuing, and of acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or 'social network', or to signal (that one is playing) a socially meaningful 'role'.

One can make various important points about Discourses, none of which, for some reason, is very popular with Americans, though they seem to be commonplace in European social theory:¹³

- 1 Discourses are inherently 'ideological' in the sense in which I defined that term in Chapter 1. They crucially involve a set of values and viewpoints about the relationships between people and the distribution of social goods (at the very least about who is an insider and who isn't, but often many others as well). One must speak and act, and at least appear to think and feel, in terms of these values and viewpoints while being in the Discourse, otherwise one doesn't count as being in it.
- 2 Discourses are resistant to internal criticism and self-scrutiny since uttering viewpoints that seriously undermine them defines one as being outside them. The Discourse itself defines what counts as acceptable criticism. Of course, one can criticize a particular Discourse from the viewpoint of another one (e.g. psychology criticizing linguistics). But what one cannot do is stand outside all Discourses and criticize any one or all of them. Criticism must always be lodged from some set of assumed values, attitudes, beliefs and ways of talking/writing and, thus, from within some Discourse.
- 3 Discourse-defined positions from which to speak and behave are not, however, just defined internal to a Discourse, but also as standpoints taken up by the Discourse in its relation to other, ultimately opposing, Discourses. The Discourse of managers in an industry is partly defined as a set of views, norms and standpoints defined by their opposition to analogous points in the Discourse of workers.¹⁴ The Discourse we identify with being a feminist is radically changed if all male Discourses disappear. The Discourse of a regular drinking group at a bar is partly defined by its points of opposition to a variety of other viewpoints (non-drinkers, people who dislike bars as places of meeting people, 'Yuppies').
- 4 Any Discourse concerns itself with certain objects and puts forward certain concepts, viewpoints and values at the expense of others. In doing so, it will *marginalize* viewpoints and values central to other Discourses.¹⁵ In fact, a Discourse can call for one to accept values in conflict with other Discourses of which one is also a member. For example, the Discourse used in literature departments used to marginalize popular literature and women's writings (though times are changing in this regard). Further, women readers of Hemingway, for instance, when acting as 'acceptable readers' by the standards of the Discourse of traditional literary criticism might find themselves complicit with values which conflict with those of various other Discourses they belong to as a woman (for example, various feminist Discourses).¹⁶
- 5 Finally, Discourses are intimately related to the distribution of social power and hierarchical structure in society (which is why they are always and everywhere ideological, see point 1). Control over certain Discourses can lead to the acquisition of social goods (money, power, status) in a society (for example, the Discourse of successful 'mainstream', 'middle-class' interviewing, which neither of the women we studied above had mastered). These Discourses empower those groups who have the least conflicts with

their other Discourses when they use them. For example, many academic, legalistic and bureaucratic discourses in our society contain a moral sub-Discourse that sees 'right' as what is derivable from general abstract principles. This can conflict to a degree with a Discourse about morality, which appears to be more often associated with women than men, in terms of which 'wrong' is seen as the disruption of social networks, and 'right' as the repair of those networks.¹⁷ Or, to take another example, the Discourse of traditional literary criticism used to be a standard route to success as a professor of literature. Since it conflicted less with the other Discourses of white, middle-class men than it did with those of women, men were empowered by it. Women were not, as they were often at cross-purposes when engaging in it.

Let us call Discourses that lead to social goods in a society 'dominant Discourses', and let us refer to those groups that have the fewest conflicts when using them as 'dominant groups'. These are both matters of degree and change to a certain extent in different contexts.

All Discourses are the products of history, whether these be Discourses connected with academic disciplines like physics or history, or ones connected with academic practices like 'essayist' writing-talking-and-thinking, or other school-based practices, or ones connected with businesses, government agencies, or other social institutions, or with Discourses embedded in local community identities such as 'Afro-American', 'Chicano', 'Yuppie' or innumerable others.

It is sometimes helpful to say that it is not individuals who speak and act, but rather that historically and socially defined Discourses speak to each other through individuals.¹⁸ The individual instantiates, gives body to, a Discourse every time he or she acts or speaks, and thus carries it, and ultimately changes it, through time. Americans tend to be very focused on the individual, and thus often miss the fact that the individual is simply the meeting point of many, sometimes conflicting, socially and historically defined Discourses.

What counts as an 'individual' is differentially defined in different Discourses within a single society and across different cultures. The various Discourses which *constitute* each of us as persons (or subjects) are changing and often are not fully consistent with each other; there is often conflict and tension between the values, beliefs, attitudes, interactional styles, uses of language and ways of being in the world which two or more Discourses represent. There is no real sense in which we humans are consistent or well integrated creatures from a cognitive or social viewpoint, though most Discourses assume that we are (and thus we do too, while we are in them). The only problem with this view of Discourses is that we should not let it obscure the equally important point that human beings can (to a certain extent) *choose* which Discourses to be in at which times (though there is, of course, a price for these, like all other choices). And these choices are very often moral choices (see Chapter 1).

Acquisition and Learning

The crucial question is: how do people come by the Discourses they are members of? Here it is necessary, before answering the question, to make an important distinction,