

DISCOURSE, IDENTITY AND CULTURE

How far people's identities are bound up with how they speak and write

The relationship between language and culture has long been a major concern in both anthropology and applied linguistics.

J.P.Gee

Gee, J. P. (1999) *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis: Theory and Method*, London: Routledge pp. 12–13, 17–18, 37 (extracts)

TEXT EXTR
ACT 1
J.P.Gee

...I want to develop several 'tools of inquiry' (ways of looking at the world of talk and interaction)...The tools of inquiry I will introduce in this chapter are primarily relevant to how we (together with others) build identities and activities and recognize the identities and activities that are being built around us. The tools to be discussed are:

(a) 'Situated identities,' that is, different identities or social positions we enact and recognize in different settings.

(b) 'Social languages,' that is, different styles of language that we use to enact and recognize different identities in different settings; different social languages also allow us to engage in all the other building tasks above (in different ways, building different sorts of things).

(c) 'Discourses' with a capital 'D,' that is, different ways in which we humans integrate language with non-language 'stuff,' such as different ways of thinking, acting, interacting, valuing, feeling, believing, and using symbols, tools, and objects in the right places and at the right times so as to enact and recognize different identities and activities, give the material world certain meanings, distribute social goods in a certain way, make certain sorts of meaningful connections in our experience, and privilege certain symbol systems and ways of knowing over others...

(d) 'Conversations' with a capital 'C,' that is, long-running and important themes or motifs that have been the focus of a variety of different texts and interactions (in different social languages and Discourses) through a significant stretch of time and across an array of institutions.

Situated Identity: identity in a specific situation.

Social Language: language used in a specific situation

Discourses: language and non verbal aspects that influence how we interact.

Conversations: main themes within a situation.

... When you speak or write anything, you use the resources of English to project yourself as a certain kind of person, a different kind in different circumstances. You also project yourself as engaged in a certain kind of activity, a different kind in different circumstances. If I have no idea who you are and what you are doing, then I cannot make sense of what you have said, written, or done. You project a different identity at a formal dinner party than you do at the family dinner table. And, though these are both dinner, they are nonetheless different activities...[pp.12–13]

... making visible and recognizable who we are and what we are doing always involves a great deal more than 'just language.' It involves acting-interacting-thinking-valuing-talking (sometimes writing-reading) in the 'appropriate way' with the 'appropriate' props at the 'appropriate' times in the 'appropriate' places.

You enact your identity differently depending on the situation

Such socially accepted associations among ways of using language, of thinking, valuing, acting, and interacting, in the 'right' places and at the 'right' times with the 'right' objects (associations that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or 'social network'), I will refer to as 'Discourses,' with a capital 'D' . . . 'Big D' Discourses are always language *plus* 'other stuff.' There are innumerable Discourses in any modern, technological, urban-based society: for example (enacting) being something as general as a type of African-American or Anglo-Australian or something as specific as being a type of modern British young second-generation affluent Sikh woman. Being a type of middle-class American, factory worker, or executive, doctor or hospital patient, teacher, administrator, or student, student of physics or of literature, member of a club or street gang, regular at the local bar, ... are all Discourses.

Discourses: language + other things that are not expressed through language

The key to Discourses is 'recognition.' If you put language, action, interaction, values, beliefs, symbols, objects, tools, and places together in such a way that others *recognize* you as a particular type of who (identity) engaged in a particular type of what (activity) here and now, then you have pulled off a Discourse (and thereby continued it through history, if only for a while longer). Whatever you have done must be similar enough to other performances to be recognizable. However, if it is different enough from what has gone before, but still recognizable, it can simultaneously change and transform Discourses. If it is not recognizable, then you're not 'in' the Discourse.

Discourse: difference between the younger and older generations of professors.

Change is possible if it is still recognizable as part of a discourse

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 birdwatchers) to basketball courts and basketballs (for basketball players). Think of all the words, symbols, deeds, objects, clothes, and tools you need to coordinate in the right way at the right time and place to ‘pull off’ (or recognize someone as) being a cutting-edge particle physicist or a Los Angeles Latino street gang member or a sensitive high-culture humanist (of old generation).

Discourse is also conveyed through ‘props’

It is sometimes helpful to think about social and political issues as if it is not just us humans who are talking and interacting with each other, but rather, the Discourses we represent and enact, and for which we are ‘carriers.’ The Discourses we enact existed before each of us came on the scene and most of them will exist long after we have left the scene. Discourses, through our words and deeds, carry on conversations with each other through history, and, in doing so, form human history.

Think, for instance, of the long-running and ever-changing ‘conversation’ in the U.S. and Canada between the Discourses of ‘being an Indian’ and ‘being an Anglo’ or of the different, but equally long-running ‘conversation’ in New Zealand between ‘being a Maori’ and ‘being an Anglo’ (or, for that matter, think of the long-running conversation between ‘being a British Anglo’ and ‘being an American Anglo’). Think of the long-running and ever-changing ‘conversation’ between creationists and biologists. Think of the long-running and ever-changing ‘conversation’ in Los Angeles between African-American teenage gang members and the L.A. police. Intriguingly, we humans are very often unaware of the history of these conversations, and thus, in a deep sense, not fully aware of what we mean when we act and talk [pp. 17–18]

Conversations are topics that continue for generations (being an African-American and being a white American)

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➤ Consider how one or more of the following individuals mentioned by Gee might ‘pull off’ a Discourse and describe what this Discourse comprises: an African-American; an Anglo-Australian; a modern British young second-generation affluent Sikh woman; a middle-class American; a factory worker; an executive; a doctor; a hospital patient; a teacher; an administrator; a student; a student of physics or of literature; a member of a club or street gang; a regular at the local bar.



TaskBI.3.3

Think of a long-running ‘conversation’ between two Discourses in a cultural context familiar to you. (The examples Gee provides in the text are the long-running ‘conversation’ in New Zealand between ‘being a Maori’ and ‘being an Anglo’, and between ‘being a British Anglo’ and ‘being an American Anglo’).