



## DISCOURSE ANALYSIS IN LINGUISTICS: CONCEPTS, EVOLUTION, AND METHODOLOGICAL CHALLENGES

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### *Abstract*

This article critically explores discourse analysis (DA) within linguistics, focusing on its conceptual ambiguities, methodological complexities, and historical evolution. The study addresses four fundamental questions: (1) What is meant by discourse analysis? (2) What semantic and methodological differences distinguish discourse analysis from related fields such as conversation analysis, content analysis, and text analysis? (3) How can we distinguish between the various perspectives on discourse analysis? (4) What are the key historical milestones that have shaped the development of discourse analysis in linguistics? Employing a three-pronged qualitative approach—descriptive, comparative, and historical—the research investigates DA's varying interpretations across different linguistic traditions, with particular emphasis on the contributions of enunciation theory. The findings reveal that while DA's definition adapts according to the theoretical and methodological orientations, its central focus on language use remains consistent. This is demonstrated through the nuanced distinctions between DA and related fields, such as content analysis, text analysis, and conversation analysis, which, though similarly concerned with language and communication, diverge in their methods, theoretical foundations, and disciplinary applications. The research concludes that DA is inherently interdisciplinary, integrating insights from multiple linguistic and cognitive domains, thus defying classification within a single theoretical tradition. Tracing DA's historical development, the paper identifies three transformative stages: the foundational Saussurean phase, the Harrisian structuralist period, and the post-1968 intellectual shift in France, which marked a transition from structural linguistics to a more dynamic focus on discourse and meaning.

**Keywords:** Structuralism, discourse analysis, Enunciation theory, context, Saussurian Theory, Harrisian approach

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## INTRODUCTION

Discourse analysis (DA), in all its orientations, presents a range of significant challenges to researchers. The first of these challenges is definitional and terminological confusion. The central issue lies in the vague boundaries of the field itself, coupled with the elusive nature of its key concept – “discourse.” This ambiguity creates a fundamental difficulty in establishing a clear definition of DA. A second type of confusion arises from the overlap between “discourse analysis” and other related terms, such as “text analysis,” “content analysis,” and “conversation analysis”. While these fields share similar objectives, they diverge in terms of methodology, focus, and theoretical underpinnings.

The second challenge concerns the multiplicity of perspectives within discourse analysis, which draws upon diverse disciplines such as sociolinguistics, enunciation theory, speech act theory, psychology, textual analysis, sociology, literary theory, and anthropology, among others. This interdisciplinary nature contributes to a fragmented understanding of DA, further complicating its study and application.

The third challenge involves the historical debates surrounding the actual emergence and development of discourse analysis. Scholars disagree on the timeline and nature of its evolution, as well as the precise stages of its increasing prominence within linguistic, literary, and humanities scholarship.

This paper aims to address these pressing issues that have hindered the development and integration of discourse analysis within linguistics. It seeks to clarify the defining features of this field, which has experienced significant shifts in both prominence and academic reception. To achieve this, the paper explores four central questions: (1) What does “discourse analysis” mean, and how can it be defined? (2) What semantic and methodological distinctions separate discourse analysis from related fields such as conversation analysis, content analysis, and text analysis? (3) How can we delineate the various theoretical perspectives within discourse analysis? (4) What are the key historical milestones that have shaped discourse analysis within the broader linguistic field?

To address these questions, this study employs a three-pronged approach: descriptive, comparative, and historical. First, a descriptive analysis will identify the defining characteristics of discourse analysis and differentiate it from related

concepts. This will also involve reviewing pioneering efforts that contributed to the establishment of the field, assessing their impact on its development. Second, a comparative approach will be adopted to explore the contributions of these efforts and their respective roles in advancing discourse analysis in linguistics. Finally, a historical approach will trace the intellectual trajectory of discourse analysis within the field of linguistics, examining the evolution of its study and analytical methodologies.

The paper is organized as follows: Following this introduction, the second section will define and clarify the concept of “discourse analysis”, with an emphasis on its contested and evolving nature in relation to other fields. The third section will explore the challenges posed by the multiplicity of perspectives and the methodological ambiguities within discourse analysis. The fourth section will provide a historical overview of the key milestones that have shaped the development of DA in linguistics. The conclusion will synthesize the findings and offer insights into the broader significance of discourse analysis within linguistic studies.

By addressing these critical issues, this study aims to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of discourse analysis – its scope, evolution, and role in linguistics – thereby advancing the field's academic rigor and theoretical clarity.

## **THE CONCEPT OF DISCOURSE ANALYSIS: A COMPARATIVE APPROACH**

Defining “discourse analysis” (DA) proves to be a complex task, primarily due to its overlap with related concepts such as “text analysis,” “content analysis,” and “conversation analysis”. While these terms share common objectives, they diverge significantly in terms of their methods, theoretical frameworks, and interpretations of “discourse”. A comparative approach is essential to clarify these nuanced semantic distinctions and provide a clearer understanding of the boundaries that define each field.

Discourse analysis is often associated with discourse linguistics, whereas “text analysis” is more closely linked to textual linguistics and structuralist approaches, particularly in the analysis of literary texts. Text analysis, sometimes referred to as “content analysis”, seeks to identify the overarching rules that govern the sequencing of meanings within a text (Dubois et al., 2002). This approach focuses not only on individual sentences but also on the coherence of larger textual structures, aiming to understand how different parts of a text fit together to create meaning.

In contrast, “conversation analysis” emerges from modern linguistic theories that focus on the rules governing dialogue, such as Grice’s pragmatics, which identifies conversational maxims underlying speech acts, and Ducrot’s integrated pragmatics. In this context, conversation analysis is defined as the study of verbal exchanges, whether oral or written, on the assumption that every discourse is fundamentally interactive (Paveau & Sarfati, 2003). This perspective focuses specifically on the interactional nature of discourse, highlighting how speakers and listeners navigate meaning within conversations.

"Discourse analysis," or utterance analysis, is commonly understood as the study of how speakers and writers employ various devices to knit single sentences together to create a coherent and cohesive text (Aitchison, 2010). This definition closely aligns with textual linguistics, particularly in its emphasis on analyzing cohesion and coherence within texts. The same applies to discourse analysis when viewed as "deconstructing a text into its basic units according to a predetermined methodological approach." (Bouqarra, 2009: 96). However, when we consider the production context of a text within this methodological framework, we enter the realm of discourse analysis; that is, we examine the text not just as a structured set of linguistic units but as a dynamic discourse shaped by its production conditions. Referring the text back to the circumstances of its production means conceiving it as a discourse (Paveau & Sarfati, 2003: 194). This highlights the overlap between text analysis and discourse analysis, with the latter considering the broader context – historical, social, and situational – in which the text is produced.

From a pragmatic and enunciative perspective, discourse analysis is more appropriately conceptualized as the integration of both linguistic structure and the conditions of its production, including historical, political, and social contexts. In other words, discourse analysis does not separate the utterance from its linguistic structure, nor from the conditions of its production, whether historical or political conditions, and does not separate the utterance from its subjective self-interactions, but rather presents reading rules to allow for a specific interpretation (Mazière, 2005). This perspective aligns closely with the linguistic approach of enunciation theory, which emphasizes the inseparability of the utterance and its structure, as well as the conditions of production and the subjective interactions between speaker and listener. As Hammou Al-Haj (2012:143) aptly describes this approach, stating, "In our analysis of discourse, we prefer to consider language at the center of power and effectiveness (i.e. in its true essence = use), where both the identity of the speaker and the addressee are determined, alongside the conversation, within the phenomena of continuity and interaction."

Dubois et al. (2002: 34) define discourse analysis as "the linguistic approach that determines the rules governing the production of a sequence of structured sentences." From a pragmatic perspective, this definition involves analyzing the use of language to uncover the meanings associated with the conditions of production. This approach focuses on understanding the "chameleonic" nature of utterances – how their meanings shift depending on the context of usage – and examining how production conditions influence these shifts.

Given the variations in its definition, the concept of discourse analysis is inherently flexible, changing depending on the theoretical framework and specific study being conducted. As Fairclough (2003: 2) points out, discourse analysis remains "one analytical strategy amongst many, and it often makes sense to use discourse analysis in conjunction with other forms of analysis, for instance ethnography or forms of institutional analysis". Consequently, discourse analysts are required to further clarify and specify from the outset their object of study, analytical methods, and objective. This includes specifying the type of discourse being analyzed - whether

narrative, poetic, political, religious, or institutional. This clarification is essential for establishing the methodological and objective boundaries of discourse analysis.

Despite the diversity of approaches and perspectives, discourse analysis retains several defining characteristics:

- It extends beyond the boundaries of sentence structure to examine larger communicative units;
- It accounts for the interactional nature of discourse, emphasizing how speakers and listeners co-construct meaning;
- It considers the circumstances of discourse production, including the social, historical, and situational context, as well as the states of the interlocutors;
- It explores the interaction between the self and the discourse, reflecting how identity and subjectivity are embedded within and reflected in communication;
- It examines the relationship between linguistic behavior and broader social and human behaviors.

Any analysis that fails to incorporate these key considerations cannot be classified as discourse analysis.

## **DISCOURSE ANALYSIS: THE ISSUE OF MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES AND METHODOLOGICAL AMBIGUITY**

Discourse analysis (DA) is a broad and interdisciplinary field that spans across multiple domains within the humanities and social sciences, making it difficult to attribute solely to any one theoretical or methodological tradition. No single linguistic, social, or psychological framework can claim exclusive ownership of discourse analysis. Rather, it is the perspective from which discourse is studied that fundamentally distinguishes the various approaches to its analysis.

Researchers across diverse academic disciplines—linguistics, sociology, psychology, philosophy, and more—approach discourse analysis from unique angles. Within linguistics alone, numerous approaches exist. Sociolinguistics, for example, examines the structure of social interaction in dialogue, focusing on phenomena like social classification and contextual factors. Psycholinguistics explores discourse in relation to language processing and perception, while philosophers of language investigate the semantic relationships between sentences and reality, examining how utterances function as tools for making truth-conditional judgments. As Brown & Yule (1983: viii-ix) note, “at this relatively early stage in the evolution of discourse analysis, there is often rather little in common between the various approaches except the discipline which they all, to varying degrees, call upon: linguistics.”

This broad interdisciplinary scope suggests that discourse analysis can encompass the same texts as those studied in sociology, conversation analysis, and other fields. However, while discourse analysis draws on these neighboring disciplines, it maintains a distinct perspective. For instance, a study of medical consultations may involve examining conversational rules (the domain of

conversation analysis), linguistic variations (the concern of sociolinguistics), and argumentative strategies (the focus of rhetoric) (Maingueneau, 1996). These different contributions are synthesized by the discourse analyst, who integrates these diverse perspectives into a unified framework. However, this multiplicity of viewpoints often leads to ambiguity surrounding the definition of discourse analysis, as the boundaries between DA and related fields—such as conversation analysis, sociolinguistics, ethnolinguistics, communication theories, and rhetorical analysis—are often blurred (Barry, 2002). This conceptual overlap significantly contributes to both the methodological ambiguity and the unclear scope of the field.

Compounding this issue is the absence of a universally accepted methodological framework within discourse linguistics. As Hammou Al-Haj (2012: 152) observes, “it is difficult and challenging to designate discourse analysis as a 'scientific' or 'linguistic' law, as discourse linguistics is still searching for a specific methodology across various fields such as history, philosophy, and economics.” Despite its linguistic roots, discourse analysis has expanded beyond traditional linguistic boundaries, becoming a vital area of study in disciplines ranging from sociology to political science. As Wajih (1993:74) notes, “it is no longer the focus of one particular team of specialists alone.” DA has thus become a central concern for scholars across the humanities and social sciences, to the extent that Claude Lévi-Strauss famously described it as a “myth or DIY work” (Hammou Al-Haj (2012: 153), underscoring its fragmented and interdisciplinary nature.

At the heart of this issue lies the concept of discourse itself, which resists any unified definition across the varied perspectives that study it. As Barry (2002: 4) emphasizes, discourse is a term that “encompasses both several meanings and a variability of discourse that prevents any attempt to harmonize points of view around a single definition that would be acceptable to all researchers.” This inherent variability is what makes discourse analysis both a complex and elusive field.

Different academic disciplines may converge on the same object of study—whether it be a specific genre of discourse, a type of text, or a particular interaction—but each discipline brings its own theoretical perspective and analytical focus. This divergence reflects the fact that discourse linguistics is not a single, unified field but rather a cluster of approaches, each with its own distinctive focus. Under the umbrella of discourse linguistics, we find subfields such as text linguistics, enunciative linguistics, pragmatics, and more, all concerned with the trans-sentential dimensions of discourse. Despite their differences, these approaches share a common goal: to move beyond the structuralist paradigm and explore how discourse functions in real-world contexts. Maingueneau (1976: 100-1) explains that “the linguistics of discourse was able to take shape when two overruns of the so-called “structuralist” perspective occurred: overstepping the sentence limit and overtaking of a linguistics of utterance, centered on the analysis of a compact corpus, without any reference to a speaker’s activity.” These subfields base their analyses on the study of linguistic behavior in relation to discourse production conditions, as well as their connection to cultural behaviors, the speaker’s identity, and the coherence of texts as they transform into discourses.

However, the multiplicity of perspectives within discourse analysis has contributed to a degree of instability and methodological ambiguity within the field. As Maingueneau (1996: 12) points out, “discourse analysis stands at the crossroads of the human sciences, and it is subject to great instability, because there are discourse analysts who are rather sociologists, others who are rather linguists, and still others who are psycholinguists.” This diversity of viewpoints complicates efforts to establish a clear and unified methodology for discourse analysis.

In light of this conceptual and methodological ambiguity, it is crucial for discourse analysts to clearly define the framework within which they operate. To ensure clarity and avoid confusion, analysts must establish specific methodological steps that distinguish their approach from those of other disciplines with similar objects of study. As Yaktine (1997: 25) emphasizes, “To define and analyze discourse in the most acceptable way, we must determine the trend to which we belong and the field in which we work according to specific epistemological questions.” These guiding questions help shape the analysis by addressing essential issues such as: Why this definition? What procedures are appropriate? What should be achieved? And how?

Therefore, although discourse analysis has made significant strides across various academic fields, it remains without a unified object of study or a coherent methodological framework. Given the factors discussed, it seems unlikely that such unity will emerge anytime soon. Despite ongoing efforts by linguists and other scholars, discourse analysis continues to exist as an interdisciplinary field, with contributions from a range of disciplines, each with its own methodology and research focus. As such, no single discipline can claim ownership of discourse analysis; rather, each contributes to its development. The wide-ranging references cited in this paper and in the literature on discourse analysis—spanning linguistics, sociology, psychology, rhetoric, politics, and beyond—attest to the interdisciplinary nature of discourse analysis.

### THREE KEY STAGES IN THE HISTORY OF DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

The roots of discourse analysis can be traced back to Ferdinand de Saussure’s distinction between *langue* (language) and *parole* (speech). According to Saussure, *langue* is a structured system of signs that expresses thoughts, whereas *parole* is more individual and subjective, shaped by personal preferences and decisions. While recognizing the importance of both approaches and their interdependence, Saussure emphasized that *langue* should be the focus of linguistic study, as it provides the scientific foundation for understanding language. He recognized the importance of *parole*—the individual use of language by speakers—but refrained from delving into its analysis, as it does not align with the conditions of rigorous and precise linguistic analysis. According to him ([1916] 1959: 18), “The activity of the speaker should be studied in a number of disciplines which have no place in linguistics except through their relation to language.” This dichotomy laid the groundwork for future research in discourse analysis, particularly regarding the relationship between language as a

formal system (*langue*) and the functional use of language (*parole*). While Saussure postponed a thorough examination of *parole*, his foundational ideas inspired later scholars like Émile Benveniste and Dominique Maingueneau to explore the complexities of discourse and its social dimensions.

It was not until the 1950s, nearly half a century after Saussure's contributions, that researchers began addressing the functional aspects of language beyond the sentence level, motivated by a growing awareness of the limitations of traditional linguistic analysis that failed to account for the functions of utterances beyond the sentence, especially at the enunciation level. At this stage, scholars generally attribute the beginning of discourse analysis to the American linguist Zellig Harris, whose merit was not only in introducing the term for the first time in 1952 article "Discourse Analysis", but also in extending linguistic analysis beyond the sentence level, introducing the idea of studying larger units of discourse. However, Harris's approach remained firmly confined within the limits of distributional linguistics, which focuses on the structural relationships between words, without considering the speaker's role or the social context in which discourse occurs. Although Harris broadened the scope of linguistic analysis, his methods did not address the essential issue of *enunciation*—the speaker's role and subjectivity in discourse. Maingueneau and other scholars criticized Harris for failing to integrate the social and subjective dimensions of discourse into his analysis. According to Maingueneau (1996: 101) notes, "Harris made it possible to cross the limits of the sentence, but in a distributionalist perspective totally foreign to the problematic of the enunciation; whereas discourse analysis must make it possible to simultaneously integrate these two aspects". Likewise, Arhlmo (2013: 58) notes, "Despite the concepts introduced in Harris's article that relate to analyzing supra-sentential structures, the work did not present anything new; instead, it continued within the Bloomfieldian trend, which focused on the grammatical and distributional aspects of words, remaining far from creating mechanisms for discourse analysis." Indeed, Harris's attempt was no more than a mere "stretching" of the distributional method to suit the structural aspects of discourse. His method thus remained limited, as it did not fully bridge the gap between structural linguistics and the social nature of discourse. His work was a significant step, but it did not provide a complete framework for analyzing discourse as a social phenomenon.

No doubt, Harris's attempt was innovative in extending linguistic analysis beyond the sentence level; however, this endeavor was faced by significant limitations, including the interference of the critical issue of enunciation—the speaker's role in shaping discourse. In this regard, he (1952: 1-2) identified three main challenges:

- The limitations of descriptive linguistics, which stops at the sentence level;
- The extralinguistic nature of the relationship between social and linguistic behavior, often treated as peripheral to linguistic analysis;
- The situational variability of discourse, which made it difficult to establish universal rules for discourse production across diverse contexts.

The third stage in the history of discourse analysis is marked by the intellectual upheaval of May 1968 in France, which catalyzed a shift away from structuralism. During this period, students and scholars protested against the rigidity of structuralist approaches, rejecting their disconnection from real-world concerns. Students staged protests, boycotted lectures, and carried banners bearing slogans like “Down with structuralism!” – a stark rejection of a framework they believed was incompatible with the objectives of modern social sciences. As Macdonell (1986: 14) puts it, “They challenged the aims and methods of the human sciences, psychology and sociology, the prevalence of American concepts. The aims and objectives of modern science were also contested”. The protests called for a more socially conscious approach to the study of language, one that accounted for the role of power, knowledge, and context in communication. This intellectual revolt reoriented university curricula and research agendas, leading to a broader, more nuanced understanding of discourse that incorporated social, political, and cultural dimensions. The May 1968 protests, however, did not mark the real beginning of discourse analysis, as the roots of the field stretch back to earlier intellectual traditions such as Foucault’s social theory and classical rhetorical studies from both Greek and Medieval Arabic rhetorical traditions. Despite being shaped by prior philosophical and rhetorical thought, the events of 1968 significantly influenced the development of discourse analysis, leading to the decline of structuralism and the rise of a more contextualized approach to studying language.

The history of discourse analysis can thus be summarized in three key stages. The first stage, which we call the *founding and postponement stage*, is associated with Saussure’s *langue-parole* dichotomy that laid the foundational groundwork for understanding language as a system, while deferring the analysis of *parole* to future scholars. The second stage, which we refer to as the *attempt stage*, is represented by Harris (1952) who attempted to extend linguistic analysis beyond the sentence level, but failed to address the crucial issue of *enunciation* and the social context of discourse. The third stage, which we call “*the stage of awareness and revolution*”, was marked by the intellectual revolt of May 1968, resulting in a reorientation of discourse analysis towards a more socially aware and context-sensitive approach. This stage emphasized the interplay between discourse, interlocutors, power, and socio-cultural context, moving away from the rigid constraints of structuralism.

Although Harris’s work has often been credited with introducing discourse analysis, it is important to recognize the concurrent contributions of scholars like Émile Benveniste, whose work on *enunciation* has been pivotal to the development of discourse analysis. Benveniste reexamined Saussure’s assumptions and introduced a theory of *enunciation* that emphasized the context of discourse and the role of the speaker. His influential works, such as “La nature des pronoms” (1956), “De la subjectivité dans le langage” (1958), and “La philosophie analytique et le langage” (1963) laid the foundation for understanding how discourse functions beyond structural relationships and incorporating the subjective, situational aspects of communication. Benveniste’s contributions have had a lasting impact on linguistics, narratology, and discourse analysis, making him a key figure in the development of discourse theory.

In the past two decades, another historical phase has emerged in the field of discourse analysis. This suggests that a fourth historical phase can be identified in the field of discourse analysis. Modern Discourse Analysis (DA) reflects major expansions that include critical approaches (CDA), multimodal and visual discourse analysis (Gunther Kress), (David Machin & Andrea Mayr, 2023). corpus-driven discourse studies, and digital or online discourse analysis, alongside increasingly interdisciplinary applications in fields such as media, politics, health communication, education, and digital culture. Collectively, these developments demonstrate how DA has evolved from a primarily structural mode of analysis into a comprehensive framework for examining language as it interacts with society, identity, and power.

All in all, the history of discourse analysis can be traced through three main stages: the foundational stage of Saussure's langue-parole dichotomy, Harris's attempt to extend linguistic analysis beyond the sentence, and the post-May 1968 intellectual revolution that shifted discourse analysis toward a more socially and contextually aware framework. While Harris's contributions are often emphasized, it is essential to recognize the concurrent developments, particularly Benveniste's work on *enunciation*, which provided a deeper understanding of the subjective dimensions of discourse. These stages together form the historical trajectory of discourse analysis, shaping it into a dynamic and interdisciplinary field.

## CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that the definition of "discourse analysis" is inherently flexible, shaped by the methodological framework and disciplinary focus of the researcher. Each study characterizes discourse analysis according to its own concepts and analytical vision, resulting in a range of analytical strategies that often require further clarification. To ensure precision and limit ambiguity, it is crucial for researchers to define the scope of their study – specifying the field of study, the type of discourse to be analyzed, and the methodology to be adopted. This approach helps frame the boundaries of their work and objectives, allowing for a more focused and cohesive analysis.

In addition, we have shown that regardless of the number of definitions presented, all discourse analyses must move beyond the constraints of sentence-level structures. Researchers must take into account the interactivity of discourse, the enunciative situations, and the broader social dimensions influencing language use. Moreover, it is essential to consider the role of human behavior in shaping linguistic behavior and discourse. Without addressing these aspects, an analysis cannot be considered part of discourse analysis.

Discourse analysis is a broad, complex, and interdisciplinary field that extends beyond linguistics. While linguists, rhetoricians, sociologists, psychologists, anthropologists, and media specialists can all engage in discourse analysis, the field's distinction lies in the methodological perspective adopted and the objectives pursued

by the researcher. When the research method and goals are linguistic in nature, the analysis can be classified as linguistic discourse analysis.

Concerning the history of discourse analysis within linguistics, we have observed that scholars differ in pinpointing its exact origins and initial contributions. To navigate this, we categorized its development into three key stages. The first, the "foundation and postponement stage," is associated with Saussure's theories. The second, the "attempt stage," is linked to Zellig Harris's efforts to extend linguistic analysis beyond the sentence. The third, the "awareness and revolution stage," corresponds to the intellectual shifts catalyzed by the May 1968 events in France. In addition, we have highlighted the substantial contributions of the linguistics of enunciation, particularly the work of Émile Benveniste. His research provided a critical foundation for advancing discourse analysis within linguistics, emphasizing the importance of enunciation and the contextual aspects of language use.

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