

*The discourse as a cognitive process and space for subjective interaction*¹

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***Abstract:** The article seeks to bring some needed clarification on the notion of discourse and to demonstrate that the delineation of discourse from the notion of text is unjustified. We will support the hypothesis that the two notions, discourse and text, are essentially equivalent and we will prove that they consist of cognitive acts, results of a series of fundamental cognitive processes: signification and communication (symbolization and networking). The theoretical aspects which underlie our hypothesis and which have led towards the reevaluation of the communication phenomenon and the notion of communicative ability are also being presented. We then draw our conclusions by emphasizing the double dimension of any discourse, understood as an authentic act of communication: cognitive process and subjective interaction.*

***Keywords:** discourse, text, cognitive process, meaning, communication, standards of textuality, discursive types, subjective interaction.*

The term included in the title of this article does not seem to pose any problems, at least in what the current language is concerned. But a more attentive look reveals that the semantic meaning of such a word is rather unprecise in nature. Like in many other cases, the fact that it is frequently utilized in various linguistic contexts gives the false impression that a rigorous definition of the term would be superfluous. An explanation is therefore needed: the aforementioned term is not a case of polysemy, as it is a case of ambiguity, of a lack of firm delimitation of its semantic boundaries, and a matter of loose definition. Apparently, the dictionaries contribute to this

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state of vagueness. For instance, the Romanian Dictionary (DEX ,98) gives a vague definition: usually a political statement (speech), made in front of an audience. Discussing in writing a scientific or literary subject. (From the French “discours”, Latin “discursus”. The Larousse Dictionary is more generous on the matter but it still lacks precision: an oratorical development, over a determined subject, delivered in public, by an orator; Adress (allocution). Usually long statements suggested by someone. [...] A written or oral manifestation of a state of mind; an ensemble of didactic writings, of theoretical approaches over a theory, a doctrine etc

We can therefore relinquish, without any regrets, to the aid of dictionaries, by adding that the common knowledge associates the term *discourse* with the term of *speech*, or an oral presentation in front of an audience.

This problem of defining the term is not limited to general dictionaries only. The same difficulty of determining a tight definition, unanimously accepted (or at least agreed upon by a majority) is also encountered within the sphere of linguistic research. On one hand, we have the dispute on the notion of *discourse* and, on the other hand, the issue of separating the *discourse* from the *text*. This latter issue refers to the research conducted within the field of pragmatics and discourse analysis as opposed to that concerned with text theory.

With regard to the multiple scientific acknowledgements of the notion of *discourse*, Elena Dragoş provides an edifying review²:

- The psycho-systematic orientation associates the discourse with the notion of momentary verbal production which further results in what John Austin named *verbal acts*. The discourse will therefore be the space within which the meaning and the contextualization processes shall take place and it will constitute the favorite object of study for pragmatics.
- The *Enunciation Theory*, as stated by Emile Benveniste, defines the discourse as a verbal event (an expression also supported by Paul Ricoeur, as we shall further see in this paper). The discourse is the result of the *discursive activity* which includes the employment of language by a speaker who addresses an either real or virtual receiver.
- Zelig Harris³ and his colleagues from the American School of Distributionalism refer to the notion of discourse as a distinctive level of study of linguistics, the transfrastic level (or the upper level of the phrase).

Anca Runcan-Măgureanu offers a synthesized version⁴ in the form of two major acknowledgements of the notion of discourse:

- a) The discourse is the result of an individual linguistic activity, exerted through the mobility of the cognitive and linguistic abilities.

2 Elena Dragoş. *Introducere în pragmatică*, Cluj-Napoca, Casa Cărţii de Ştiinţă, 2000, pp. 53-56

3 Zelig Harris. *Discourse analysis in Language* nr. 2, 1952, pp.1-30

4 Anca Runcan-Măgureanu *Aspecte semantice ale constituirii textului*, in „Semantica şi semiotică”, Bucureşti, Editura Ştiinţifică şi Enciclopedică, 1987, pp. 43 et seq.

- b) On the other hand, the discourse is a linguistic activity with a social ending, as stated by the social norms agreed upon within a certain community that uses a particular language.

It is germane to conclude that the above views are complementary in nature and that they can be easily comprised within one definition. We will therefore propose a preliminary definition of *the discourse as a means of exploitation of the system of the language/ a means of exerting the language faculty, having a double ending: cognitive and social, respectively.*

We can immediately argue that such a definition cancels any type of consistent delimitation between discourse and text, despite the fact that, as above mentioned, linguistic research tends to introduce such an artificial delimitation with the only merit of stirring futile disputes. Both the discourse and the text are the result of a controlled manifestation of the cognitive and linguistic abilities; both of them are therefore **elaborate** linguistic products; they materialize through the exploitation of the language system understood as a **set of signs and usage rules**; the discourse/the text both assume a series of **symbolization operations** (which depict the individual's traits) and a series of **relationship operations**, respectively (which have a social ending).

This last dichotomy is crucial in reuniting the two aforementioned acknowledgements in the same definition and in eliminating the differentiation between discourse and text. The duality (*symbolization/signification*) which describes our linguistic products (discourses/texts) mirrors the duality of the human nature itself. The cognitive activity is actually the materialization of the individual's fundamental impulse of giving meaning to reality. The same individual possesses the impulse of socialization, of relating to the other individuals. It is here germane to mention Saint Augustine's conception which attributes two fundamental functions to the notion of language: language as an **instrument of thought** and language as a **communication tool**, respectively: "Our only means of reason, *i.e.* to signify, is to highlight and move into someone else's spirit what the person that initializes the sign has into his own spirit".⁵ It is important to mark the apparently paradoxical wording which refers to only one reason, but separated into the act of highlighting and the act of moving. The formulation is only a specious paradox since the warrant of the significant action includes two complementary actions: the mental elucidation (the linguistic materialization of thoughts) as stated by the term "highlight" and the conveyance towards the interlocutor, *i.e.* "to move into someone else's spirit". The verbal signs are both the ones that exteriorize the thought and the ones that transpose the same thought into someone else's spirit. The verbal signs therefore form the support for communication and communion between people at the same time.

5 Tzvetan Todorov. *Teorii ale simbolului*, translated by Mihai Murgu, foreword by Maria Carпов, Univers, București, p. 58

We should now mention Christian Brassac's own interpretation⁶ of the medieval philosopher's version. "The discursive output of an individual during a monologue represents a *cognitive process*. The discursive output attributed to two individuals during a dialogue form a conjugated cognitive process." The two assertions are equally laconic and edifying in nature. We are talking about two cognitive processes, out of which one has also a communicative, relational value, but both of them are being based upon the linguistic activity. An explanatory note is needed in order to clarify the French researcher's statement: in the case of a monologue, the relational dimension is basically a virtual one and it will be updated in the following situation (the dialogue).

The above sketched acknowledgement with regard to the notion of discourse is an integrative one and it circumscribes other possible definitions which already were or will be formulated in this respect. If we admit the existence of the two complementary dimensions, we will further be able to observe the existence of a semiotic process along the syntagmatic axis of language and to highlight the fact that the discourse would rather be associated with the pragmatic dimension* of communication. In other words, it should be seen as an act of communication which encompasses the concrete conditions of its production.

[*we here recall Charles Morris's⁷ tripartition within the field of semiotics. Its ramifications include: semantics – or the relationship between signs and their reviewer, syntax – which studies the relations between the signs that form a phrase, and pragmatics, respectively – the discipline that follows the relationship between signs and their users.]

In another train of thoughts, a semiotic perspective approaches the notion of discourse even further to that of the text. Jean-Blaise Grize⁸ underlies the discourse on Charles Peirce's triad (signs, reason, knowledge), associates the discourse with the i-limited process of semiosis and concludes that, likewise semiosis, the discourse has a dynamic character, a concrete and determined object to be analyzed; it has a procedural character, supported by the unstable production conditions (the speaker and the receiver's traits or the conjectural determinations).

This idea is strengthened by Cesare Segre's assertion, according to which the linguistic act and the communication situation form an inseparable duo.⁹ We will

6 Christian Brassac. *Action située et distribuée et analyse du discours: quelques interrogations*, Cahiers de Linguistique Française no. 26/2004, pp. 251-268.

7 Charles Morris. *Fundamentele teoriei semnelor*, translation and foreword by Delia Marga, Cluj-Napoca, Editura Fundației pentru Studii Europene, 2003.

8 In *La construction du discours: un point de vue semiotique*. Presses Universitaires de Nancy, 1990

9 Cesare Segre. *Istorie, Cultură, Critică*, translated by Ștefania Mincu, foreword by Marin Mincu, București, Univers, 1986, pp. 350-351.

therefore distinguish various analysis levels within the discourse:

- The motivational level, attributed to the speaker;
- The intentional level, also attributed to the speaker;
- The performance level, or the influence of the message on the receiver;
- The referential context and the concrete conjunctures which circumscribe the act of communication.

Finally, Teun van Dijk emphasizes the fact that the text and the context are indissoluble notions, since the discourse is not static, but it forms a social activity described by a certain physical, social and cultural context that shape its development.¹⁰

We should take into consideration that van Dijk refers to the notion of discourse as part of a volume entitled *Text and Context*. Despite the attempts to separate the discourse from the text, the tendency noted in the text theory research leads to the same conclusions which support our claim that the delimitation between the two notions is logically flawed. From a practical point of view, the contributions within the field of text theory overlap with those from the discourse analysis domain.

Carmen Vlad offers a highly eloquent image of the major orientations spotted within the field of text theory. However, the reputed researcher deliberately ignores any reference to the discourse and discourse analysis and limits her approach to the text and text theory. "But what, on a meta-theoretical level, separates the former approaches from one of the most recent views in linguistics, which is *text theory*, appears to be within anyone's sight, within the essence of the interrogations and in the general character of the answers projected upon the text itself."¹¹

The crucial tendencies identified by Carmen Vlad in the last decades' linguistics are the following¹²:

- a) The *syntax*, which has been formerly regarded as a main component in phrase construction, is now being criticized and sanctioned for its rigid and static assumptions;
- b) The study of language as a static system is currently being abandoned in the favor of verbal communication mechanisms' research (conversation theory and the theory of verbal interactions constitute proper examples in this respect);
- c) The perspective upon meaning has also shifted. The traditional linguistics dealt with the analysis of the phrase components and the way in which they make sense as a whole. On the other hand, the current linguistics considers that not the addition of the elements is responsible for the overall meaning,

10 Teun van Dijk, *Texte*, University of Amsterdam, 1981, pp. 5 et seq., apud Elena Dragoș, *op.cit.*

11 Carmen Vlad. *Sensul – dimensiune esențială a textului*, Cluj-Napoca, Editura Dacia, 1994, p. 5.

12 *Ibidem*, pp. 6-14.

but the global meaning is dividing itself into individual signs. This new perspective thus focuses on how linguistic phenomena configure a network of textual values intended to justify each of the constituent elements;

- c) The classical levels of language (phonetic, morphological, syntactic, semantic) are now being completed by the transfrastic level (superior to the phrase);
- d) An ever greater attention has been given to pragmatics, a discipline which studies the communicative dimension of language. This discipline focused its attention on enunciation seen as a distinct phenomena, and on the study of those relations between language and context that are finally materialized through the aid of language. John Searle, with reference to John Austin's theory about the three types of verbal acts, considers pragmatics to have a central role. Nevertheless, the rise of pragmatics has been driven by the study of pragmatic connectors and deictic categories;
- e) Eco's distinction between lexical meaning and the textual-discursive meaning has also been accepted and operated. This distinction refers to those situations where there is a mismatch between the visible textual meaning and the significance of the constituent units (as in the case of irony, proverbs or idioms);
- f) The relationship between the speaker and the receiver is no longer seen as unidirectional, but as a process of reciprocal determination. The receiver is considered to be an active player which determines the occurrence of the text itself;
- g) The notion of context is also reviewed and seen as a text component.
„The post-structuralist reflection movement and post-generativist movement are generally characterized by an evolutive direction from features such as *order, simplicity, and rationality* towards the opposite ones, such as *chaos, complexity, randomness*, an obvious movement towards ordinary language (vs. scientific language), towards dialogue (vs. monologue) and, finally, towards the conventional and discursive sense (vs. conventional or lexical sense).”¹³

We can conclude that linguistics has shifted from the study of language as an inert and abstract structure, reigned by rigid principles, to the research of language seen as an exertion of the language faculty. Under these conditions, the text will become a central notion which basically designates any product of the communication act. We will therefore be able to define the *text* as *an elaborate verbal outcome, characterized through the presence of textual meaning and cohesion and constituted as a network of significances which includes the verbal signs, the relations between them and the relationships between the signs, the speaker and the receiver.*

13 Carmen Vlad. *Sensul – dimensiune esențială a textului*, Cluj-Napoca, Editura Dacia, 1994, p. 14.

A series of observations need to be made:

- The above definition is equally valid in the case of *discourse*;
- The syntagm „elaborate verbal outcome” implies that one should not consider any unstructured or involuntarily transmitted message a form of text. In any other case, the status of a *text/discourse* is not conditioned by the dimension, the oral or the written character of a message. The main condition remains the existence of the textual meaning and cohesion;
- From the pragmatics point of view, any object class is formed by textual objects. As such: a) any communication act is a textual product; b) any text is constructed as a communication act;
- The term of text will be related both to the verbal outcome and the concrete conditions under which a particular verbal act is being produced and received and the act of producing/receiving the text itself. As previously stated, the text includes the verbal signs and the relationships between them, as well as their relations with the users and a particular context.
- The prerequisite for considering a series of assertions a text or discourse is the existence of the textual meaning and cohesion.

One can immediately conclude that the basis upon which the notions of text and discourse are considered alike is valid. From this point forward, we shall thus treat the two notions. In accordance with the title of this article, we will opt for the term *discourse* and use the abbreviated forms T (for *transmitter*) and R (for *receiver*, respectively).¹⁴ For accuracy reasons, we shall refer to Daniela Roventța-Frumușani’s considerations. The mentioned author defines the communication ability¹⁵ as an essential trait of the individual which accurately reflects his personality. She then brings into discussion Umberto Eco’s opinion with regard to this ability and describes three ancillary dimensions:

- The linguistic competence, seen as the consistency of the individual vocabulary and the ability to manipulate the elements and rules specific to a language;
- The socio-cultural competence, which targets two different aspects: the understanding and the exploitation of the physical context and the understanding and management of human relations (with these being classified as *symmetric/asymmetric*, *distance/proximity* and *convergence/divergence*);
- The encyclopedic competence (or the intellectual level of the speaker).

¹⁴ We do highlight the fact that the notions of *transmitter* and *receiver* are somehow inadequate. First, because of the bidirectional character of communication and the active role of the receiver; second, because the transmitter can also assume the role of a receiver during the communication act. Linguists have suggested more appropriate terms, such as *speaker/colocutor*, but we shall stick to the already established and well-known versions.

¹⁵ Daniela Roventța-Frumușani. *Analiza discursului: ipoteze și ipostaze*, București, Tritonic, 2005, p. 65.

With reference to the contribution of D. Maingueneau, Daniela Roventța-Frumușani states a **series of oppositions**, with the aim of delineating the term of discourse more precisely.¹⁶ We shall therefore consider:

- a) The discourse as opposed to the phrase. The phrase is a language unit, composed by subordinate units, or sentences. The discourse is a product of speaking, it is superior to the phrase and it has autonomy from a communicational perspective.
- b) The discourse as opposed to the assertion. The latter is a pragmatic concept, understood as both the information conveyed to the receiver and the act of verbalizing a subjective attitude towards reality itself.
- c) The discourse as opposed to language. As stated before, language should be seen as an abstract system of signs and usage rules, whereas the discourse is defined as the use of the virtual linguistic resources within an established context.
- d) The discourse as opposed to the act of narration¹⁷. In our opinion, this constitutes an irrelevant distinction, due to the fact that the act of narration is a form of producing a discourse.
- e) The discourse as opposed to text. This issue has been previously addressed in the paper.

The cited volume of the author also brings about a systematization of the standards of textuality¹⁸ or, in other words, a systematization of the conditions needed to be met by a set of phrases in order to be considered a discourse. These standards further emphasize the inherent complexity of the notion under discussion. Hence, a discourse shall be described by the following:

- a) Coherence – the term refers to the logical connections that take place at the deep level of the text structure. Coherence is fundamentally ensured by the nomination of the subject and the hypothesis and the subordination of all the discursive sequences to the central hypothesis (as a means of prevention against digressions, incongruities or contradictions);
- b) Cohesion – it is provided through the delivery of logical connections at a linguistic level (verbal expression level);
- c) Intent – focused on the illocutionary dimension of the speech, the one that refers to the attitude and aims of the transmitter. The nomination of the hypothesis also implies the attitude that the speaker will adopt with regard to

16 Daniela Roventța-Frumușani. *Analiza discursului: ipoteze și ipostaze*, București, Tritonic, 2005, pp. 67 et seq.

17 *Récit*, in French

18 *Ibidem*, pp. 72-76. The author speaks about the standards of textuality with reference to the notion of discourse, which constitutes an additional support for our text-discourse supraposition.

the issue considered. This attitude may vary from maximum self-censorship (impersonality) to utter expression of subjectivity; however, consistency is recommended within the boundaries of the same text;

- d) Acceptability – this term is associated with the attitudes and expectations of the receiver. The ability of the receiver to interpret is equally important and paramount to the occurrence of the communication act itself;
- e) Informativity - this condition can be put into relation with the requirements stipulated by the quantity and quality maxims of Paul Grice;
- f) Situationality – with reference to the consistent influence of the context which, according to recent research, forms a constitutive instance of the text;
- g) Intertextuality – it has been recently included within the linguistic research field. It claims that the discourse often enters a dialogue with previous discourses.

Another point of interest in *Discourse Analysis...* is the typology of discursive forms. An explanation is needed beforehand. In reality, the mentioned forms may rarely be encountered as exclusive types of discourse. In other words, these forms are actually means of discourse achievement and are therefore used in combination. In another train of thoughts, narration, description or argumentation cannot constitute discourses by themselves if we accept the scientific view that defines the discourse beyond exposure modes only. Finally, an argumentative discourse is difficult to achieve in the absence of the narrations and depictions seen as argumentative units. Here are the four types of discourse¹⁹ that the author cites from the rhetorical tradition:

- **Instructive discourse (informative).** The focus is on the information contained within the discourse. The referential function is prevalent, and the subjective implication of the actors is minimal. The prototype in this case is the scientific discourse. Other examples may include various texts with informative intent only, such as instruction guides for certain products, prospectuses, data sheets etc.
- **Narrative discourse.** It implies the development of an action with the participation of a certain number of actors. The level of implication of the narrator varies, from an objective narrator to a subjective voice that shapes the story according to his own perspective. Temporal and causal relations are prevalent.
- **Descriptive discourse.** It deals with the depiction of a portion of the empirical reality, a phenomenon, a character, a feeling etc. The level of subjectivity varies in this case as well. The extremes are, on one hand, the scientific discourse, and, on the other hand, the lyrical picture or confession. It is

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 85 et seq

generally spatially organized as a sequence of attributes and determinations of the reality described.

- **Argumentative discourse.** This is a type of discourse which aims to promote a thesis constituted as an individual point of view upon an aspect of the reality. The thesis considered is not axiomatic in nature and it is for this reason that it needs to be supported with arguments. The entire discursive structure focuses on obtaining the rational and subjective agreement of the receiver. The argumentation will thus reunite rational arguments with examples, images, or analogies that appeal to the affective side of the receiver.

The following paragraph will draw the conclusions upon the characteristics of discourse, as stated in our previous discussion. We first want to emphasize the fact that the discourse is built and transmitted in a deliberate manner. This in turn implies that the **communicative ability** is in motion, as defined by Umberto Eco. [The Italian semiotician highlights that one cannot limit the communicative ability to the linguistic side. In fact, Eco supplements Saussure's vision, by specifying that language consists of a code (which includes a vocabulary and a grammar) and an encyclopedia (defined as summation of knowledge gained through education and experience), which guide the codification and decodification process in a pragmatic manner. The communicative competence, therefore, includes, in addition to the linguistic skills, a so-called encyclopedic competence.²⁰ As we have previously seen, Daniela Roventă-Frumușani adds a socio-cultural dimension to the other three above mentioned.]

Secondly, the communicative competence forces the transmitter to structure the discourse with reference to the context and the receiver. The delineation of the approached issue, the designation of the central and secondary assumptions, the selection of the arguments, the attitude promoted by the speaker, and the structure of the text all need to be adapted to the concrete conditions under which the discourse takes place and to the traits of the receiver.

Hence, the context and the receiver become constituent instances of the text. This fact need not be understood only by the transmitter of the message. The receiver shall, in turn, assume the appropriate conduct as claimed by the *interaction* occurred as a result of the communication act. The consistency and promptness of his input will differ according to the circumstances, but his role in the materialization of the textual meaning through interpretation remains decisive.

The *discursive* status is not limited by dimensions (in extreme terms, a single phrase or hundreds of pages can both be defined as a discourse) or exposure modes (oral or written). At the same time, a random series of sentences does not necessarily form a discourse only because they have been consecutively uttered by the same individual in a certain situation. An example would be the famous speech given by

20 Umberto Eco. *Sémiotique et philosophie du langage*, PUF, Paris, 1988, chap. *Signe et sujet*

Farfuridi.²¹ In contrast, the statements that Caragiale imagines and then attributes to his character constitute a discourse as their coherence should be understood with reference to the play as a whole. Those statements therefore fit into context and require an appropriate interpretation on part of the receiver (here understood as the reader) in order to accomplish their meaning.

The *textual cohesion* and *the orientation towards the receiver* constitute prerequisites for a number of sentences to be considered a discourse. If we go back to Saint Augustine's, Christian Brassac's or Anca Runcan-Măgureanu's opinions, we can summarize by saying that the textual cohesion is the result of the cognitive process, and the orientation towards the receiver is imposed by the social ending inherent to any communication act. The two aforementioned conditions are inextricably linked and they necessarily imply one other. We need to ensure the textual coherence and cohesion especially because the discourse is intended to be received by an individual. In the same way, we have to orientate the text towards its future reception in order to ensure its coherence and cohesion. We now go back to the fundamental dichotomy above mentioned. We talked about a somehow paradoxical character of any kind of discursive output. Any discourse has both a symbolic and communicative dimension. The first one is justified by the fundamental impulse for knowledge, by the permanent referral to reality in our attempt to update its meanings. If this is actually the expansion force of the individual consciousness, the second dimension would represent the fundamental inclination towards limitation by reference to otherness, to communication or by communion mediated through language. From this perspective, the concept of *interaction* acquires original and subtle nuances. The discourse (Roman Jakobson's message) becomes the location of a meeting, which, from a psychological view, forms the primary fact in any communication act. The verbal signs that compile this space facilitate the endless series of encounters which we initiate or the ones that we accept in order to shape the horizon circumscribed by our individual consciousness.

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21 His speech is incoherent, has no receiver; it ignores the context and despises its receivers.

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