ISSN:2828-6235
Impact factor:13.77

International Journal of Literature and Language Studies(IJLLS)

DISCOURSE, CULTURE, AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF SOCIAL REALITY: A CRITICAL AND DISCURSIVE PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: This article examines the relationship between discourse, culture, and the construction of social reality from critical and discursive perspectives. It argues that discourse should not be understood merely as a linguistic means of representing an already existing reality. Rather, discourse functions as a constitutive mechanism through which cultural meanings, social identities, subject positions, and interpretations of reality are continuously produced, negotiated, reproduced, and transformed. Drawing on Critical Discourse Analysis, Discourse Theory, social constructionism, and interpretive approaches to culture, the study examines the relationship between discourse, power, ideology, subjectivity, and cultural meaning-making. Particular attention is paid to the role of discourse communities and interdiscursive interaction in the reproduction and transformation of cultural meanings. The analysis demonstrates that cultural reality is neither completely fixed nor entirely imposed by dominant institutions. Although institutional and media discourses may establish hegemonic interpretations, discourse communities retain the capacity to negotiate, reinterpret, and challenge established meanings. The study therefore conceptualizes culture as an ongoing process of symbolic interaction in which discourse simultaneously reflects inherited meanings and creates possibilities for cultural change.

Keywords: discourse, culture, Critical Discourse Analysis, Discourse Theory, social constructionism, ideology, power, subjectivity, agency, discourse community

Introduction

The relationship between discourse, culture, and society has become a significant area of interdisciplinary inquiry in contemporary linguistics, cultural studies, sociology, and the humanities. Earlier approaches frequently treated language primarily as a system for representing an external reality. More recent approaches, however, have emphasized the constitutive role of discourse in shaping how individuals and communities perceive, categorize, and interpret their social world. From this perspective, discourse is not simply a linguistic product but a socially situated practice through which meanings, identities, and relationships are produced and negotiated.

The concept of culture has undergone a similar transformation. Tylor's classical definition describes culture as a “complex whole” encompassing knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and other capacities acquired by members of society (1). Later interpretive approaches shifted attention from culture as a collection of social elements toward culture as a system of meanings through which people understand and organize their experience. Geertz, for example, emphasizes the role of historically transmitted meanings in the interpretation of human life (89).

The development of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) contributed significantly to this shift by establishing connections between linguistic practices, ideology, and relations of power. Hodge and Kress demonstrated how linguistic structures may participate in ideological processes, while Fairclough further developed the analysis of language in relation to social power and institutional practices. Discourse Theory, particularly through the work of Laclau and Mouffe, provides a complementary perspective by emphasizing the contingent construction of social meanings, identities, and hegemonic relations.

The research gap addressed in this article lies in the need for a more integrated account of how discourse operates simultaneously as a linguistic, cultural, and social mechanism. The aim is to examine how discourse participates in the construction, negotiation, reproduction, and transformation of cultural reality.

The study addresses four questions: (1) How does discourse contribute to the construction and reproduction of cultural meanings? (2) How do power and ideology influence the discursive construction of social reality? (3) How are subjectivity and agency constructed through culturally situated discourses? and (4) How can interaction among different discourses contribute to cultural transformation?

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, theoretical-interpretive methodology. It is based on a critical synthesis of major works in discourse studies, cultural theory, social constructionism, and interpretive sociology. The analysis does not rely on a quantitative corpus; instead, it compares and integrates concepts that explain the relationship between discourse, culture, power, subjectivity, and social reality.

The theoretical corpus was selected according to its direct relevance to the research questions. Particular attention was given to Critical Discourse Analysis (Hodge and Kress; Fairclough), Discourse Theory (Laclau and Mouffe; Carpentier and Spinoy), interpretive cultural analysis (Geertz), structuration theory (Giddens), hermeneutics (Gadamer), and theories of subjectivity and agency (Foucault; Duranti).

The analytical procedure consisted of three stages. First, key concepts were identified and grouped around four analytical dimensions: discourse and meaning-making, discourse and power, discourse and subjectivity, and discourse and cultural transformation. Second, similarities and differences among the theoretical positions were examined. Third, the findings were synthesized into an integrated model in which discourse is treated as both a product of cultural practices and a mechanism through which cultural reality is reproduced and transformed.

The study is therefore conceptual rather than empirical. Its purpose is to develop a coherent theoretical framework that can subsequently be applied to literary, media, political, or other specialized discourse corpora.

Theoretical Framework

Discourse is understood here not simply as an extended linguistic unit but as a socially situated practice through which meanings are produced, circulated, negotiated, and transformed. Teubert emphasizes the relationship among meaning, discourse, and society, suggesting that meanings acquire social significance through their use within communicative contexts (Teubert). Discourse communities therefore play an important role in establishing and negotiating meaning.

Culture, similarly, can be conceptualized as an ongoing process of collective meaning-making. Tylor's classical definition remains historically important, while Geertz places systems of meaning at the center of cultural interpretation (1; 89). Cultural meanings are continually reproduced through communication, but every communicative act may also modify those meanings.

Giddens's theory of structuration provides a useful basis for understanding the reciprocal relationship between discourse and social structure. Individuals inherit established linguistic and cultural conventions, yet they can also reproduce or modify them. Social structures therefore constrain practice while simultaneously being reproduced through practice (Giddens).

Critical Discourse Analysis provides a framework for investigating the relationship between language, ideology, and power. Hodge and Kress demonstrate the ideological dimension of linguistic representation, while Fairclough emphasizes how discourse may reproduce unequal social relations. Laclau and Mouffe's Discourse Theory complements this approach by emphasizing contingency, hegemony, and the contestability of social meanings.

Foucault's work challenges the conception of the subject as a completely autonomous and pre-existing entity. Subject positions are historically produced through discourse, institutions, and relations of power (Foucault). Yet discursive construction does not eliminate agency. Individuals may reproduce, negotiate, reinterpret, or resist available meanings. Duranti further demonstrates that concepts such as intention and agency may vary across cultural contexts (31–40).

Discussion and Analysis

The theoretical synthesis demonstrates that discourse functions as a primary mechanism of cultural meaning-making. Individuals interpret events through culturally available linguistic and symbolic resources, while their interpretations contribute to the continuation or transformation of those resources.

Discourses do not exist independently. Political discourse may interact with media discourse; academic discourse may enter public discourse; and professional discourse may influence everyday communication. Such interdiscursive interaction can reinforce, modify, or challenge established meanings. Cultural change can therefore emerge from contact among different discourses.

Power is another central dimension. Institutions with greater communicative resources may have greater opportunities to circulate particular interpretations of reality. Media discourse can make specific representations appear natural, objective, or inevitable. CDA makes it possible to examine who speaks, who is represented, who is marginalized, and which interpretations are presented as legitimate (Fairclough).

At the same time, discourse should not be regarded as a one-way mechanism of ideological control. Audiences and discourse communities may reinterpret dominant representations. Subjectivity is similarly dynamic: individuals become intelligible through culturally specific discourses but can negotiate the identities available to them.

Culture should therefore be conceptualized as an ongoing process rather than a completed system. Meanings are inherited, reproduced, challenged, and transformed through interaction. Cultural continuity and cultural change are consequently two dimensions of the same discursive process.

The researcher also participates in interpretation. Gadamer's hermeneutic perspective emphasizes the interaction between the interpreter and the object of interpretation. Cultural analysis therefore

requires researchers to recognize their interpretive position and justify their analytical categories (Gadamer).

The relationship can be represented as:

Discourse → Representation → Interpretation → Cultural Meaning → Subject Positioning → Social Reproduction/Transformation

The process is not linear: each component influences the others. Discourse provides representations; representations are interpreted through cultural frameworks; interpretations position subjects; subjects reproduce or challenge existing meanings; and transformed meanings become part of subsequent discourse.

Conclusion

This article has examined the relationship between discourse, culture, and the construction of social reality from critical and discursive perspectives. The analysis demonstrates that discourse cannot be reduced to a linguistic mechanism for describing an already existing world. Instead, discourse actively participates in the production of cultural meanings, social identities, subject positions, and interpretations of reality.

The relationship between discourse and culture is fundamentally reciprocal. Cultural frameworks influence the production and interpretation of discourse, while discourse contributes to the reproduction and transformation of cultural frameworks. Dominant institutions may establish particular representations as legitimate or natural, especially through influential media and institutional discourses. However, discourse communities retain possibilities for reinterpretation and resistance.

Subjectivity represents another important dimension. Individuals become intelligible through culturally and historically specific discursive categories, but they are not completely determined by them. Agency operates through the ability to reproduce, negotiate, and transform available meanings.

The study therefore proposes that discourse should be understood as a constitutive social practice. It simultaneously reflects inherited cultural meanings and provides resources for their transformation. Ultimately, culture is not simply represented through discourse; it is continuously produced through discourse. This perspective provides a strong theoretical foundation for future empirical research into literary, media, political, and intercultural discourse.

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