

## THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE CONCEPT OF DISCOURSE IN LINGUISTICS

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**Annotation:** This article examines the historical development and evolution of the concept of discourse within the field of linguistics. It traces the term's origins from classical rhetoric through structuralism and post-structuralism to contemporary discourse analysis. By integrating definitions from authoritative dictionaries and insights from key linguistic theorists, the study highlights the dynamic nature of discourse as both a linguistic and social construct.

**Keywords:** discourse; discourse analysis; critical discourse analysis; sociocognitive approach; text linguistics; multimodality; digital communication

**Аннотация:** Данная статья исследует историческое развитие и эволюцию понятия дискурса в лингвистике. Рассматриваются истоки термина от классической риторики через структурализм и постструктурализм до современной дискурсивной аналитики. Путем интеграции определений из авторитетных словарей и взглядов ключевых лингвистических теоретиков, исследование подчеркивает динамичную природу дискурса как лингвистического и социального конструкта.

**Ключевые слова:** дискурс; дискурс-анализ; критический дискурс-анализ; социокогнитивный подход; текстовая лингвистика; мультимодальность; цифровая коммуникация

### Introduction

Although discourse is now one of the most frequently used terms in linguistics and neighboring disciplines, it remains a notoriously slippery concept. In one article it may refer to stretches of language longer than a sentence; in another, to institutional ways of talking about migration, gender, or the economy; and in yet another, to large-scale formations of knowledge. This diversity reflects a long intellectual history in which different linguistic schools and theories of society have attempted to capture how language operates in the world. Within classical structuralism, discourse was not a central concern. Early Saussurean linguistics focused primarily on the abstract system of language and sentence-level structure, leaving extended texts and socially embedded language use to rhetoric or philosophy. Only from the mid-twentieth century onward did discourse become a systematic object of linguistic inquiry and later a key term in debates on ideology, power, and identity.

### Main Part

For much of the early twentieth century, mainstream linguistics was primarily devoted to describing phonological and grammatical systems, with the sentence regarded as the upper limit of analysis.

Anything beyond that—texts, narratives, conversations—was generally treated as a sequence of independent sentences. Early uses of discourse therefore remained vague.

A major turning point came with Zellig Harris's 1952 article "**Discourse Analysis**", in which he proposed extending distributional methods to connected sequences of sentences [9]. Harris did not yet treat discourse as social practice, but his work was **the first systematic attempt to analyze discourse as a linguistic unit**, laying the foundation for later developments in text linguistics and pragmatics.

A second significant shift followed with the rise of text linguistics and systemic functional linguistics. In *Cohesion in English*, Halliday and Hasan demonstrated that texts are held together by cohesive devices such as reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction, and lexical relations [1]. Their functional approach conceptualized language as a resource for making socially situated meaning, linking grammar to discourse functions [2].

### Discourse as Language in Use

A further development came from pragmatics, conversation analysis, and ethnography of communication, shifting attention from textual form to language as social action. Tannen's *Talking Voices* illustrates how repetition, reported speech, and imagery contribute to involvement and relational work [6]. In this tradition, discourse is treated as an emergent, interactional process shaped by turn-taking, sequential patterns, and participants' expectations.

### Critical and Sociocognitive Expansions

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) significantly broadened the definition of discourse. Fairclough conceptualized discourse as a form of social practice that shapes and is shaped by power relations [3]. Van Dijk's sociocognitive model emphasized that discourse mediates between social structures and mental models [8]. These approaches interpret discourse as a site where ideology is reproduced or resisted, and where representations of social groups and events carry political consequences.

### Post-structuralist Influences

Post-structuralist thought, especially Foucault's work, further expanded the scope of discourse. For Foucault, discourses are historically specific formations of statements that define what can be said, by whom, and under what institutional authority [4]. This conceptualization shifted discourse away from linguistic surface forms toward deeper epistemic formations.

### Interaction, Identity, and Practice

Later scholars like Gee connected linguistic, social, and practice-oriented perspectives. Gee distinguishes between "little-d discourse" (language-in-use) and "big-D Discourse" (identity-forming practices combining language, action, and values) [5]. This approach emphasizes discourse as a mechanism for constructing and negotiating identities.

### Digital and Multimodal Discourse

Digital technology introduced new communicative environments that are textual, visual, and interactive. Herring's CMDA framework adapts discourse analytic tools to online data, considering

features such as synchronicity and persistence [7]. Digital discourse often blends text with emojis, GIFs, images, and video, highlighting the inherently multimodal nature of contemporary communication.

**Table 1. Historical Development of the Concept of Discourse in Linguistics**

Historical Stage	Major Contributors	How Discourse Is Defined	Main Contribution
Early Structural Period (Pre-1950s)	Saussure, Bloomfield	Connected speech; not systematized	Background for later models
Early Discourse Analysis (1950s)	Zellig Harris	Discourse as connected sentence sequences; distributional relations	Introduced 'discourse analysis' as a linguistic method
Text Linguistics & SFL (1960–1970s)	Halliday, Hasan	Cohesive text; discourse above the sentence	Introduced cohesion, context, functional structure
Pragmatics & Interactional Approaches (1970–1980s)	Tannen, Sacks, Goffman	Language-in-use; interactional process	Established discourse as emergent social action
Critical & Sociocognitive Approaches (1980–2000s)	Fairclough, van Dijk, Wodak	Discourse as ideology and social practice	Added power, cognition, representation
Post-structuralism	Foucault	Discourses as knowledge systems	Reframed discourse as epistemic formation
Sociocultural Approaches	Gee, Rampton	Big-D Discourse; identity practice	Linked discourse to social identity
Digital & Multimodal Era	Herring, Kress & van Leeuwen	Multimodal, platform-specific discourse	Expanded discourse to digital environments

**Conclusion**

This study has outlined the ways in which discourse has evolved from an ancillary notion within structuralism to a central analytical concept across multiple linguistic traditions. Whether examined as cohesive text [1], interactional practice [6], ideological structure [3], or multimodal digital communication [7], discourse consistently emerges as the interface where linguistic form meets social meaning.

For contemporary researchers, understanding this conceptual history is essential for defining what counts as discourse in their own work and for situating their research within broader theoretical traditions. As new communicative genres and AI-mediated texts continue to evolve, the concept of discourse will likewise expand and adapt.

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