

The Role of Discourse in Constructing Social Reality

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Abstract - Discourse plays a central role in shaping and constructing social reality by influencing how individuals interpret, negotiate, and respond to the world around them. Rather than functioning as a neutral medium of communication, discourse actively produces meanings, organizes knowledge, and establishes power relations within society. This paper explores the theoretical foundations of discourse analysis and demonstrates how language contributes to the construction of social reality across various domains, including media, politics, education, and digital communication. Drawing on the works of Foucault, Fairclough, and van Dijk, the study emphasizes the role of ideology and power in shaping dominant discourses and marginalizing alternative voices. Through illustrative examples, such as media framing, political rhetoric, and online communication practices, the paper reveals how discourse not only reflects but also transforms social perceptions and identities. The findings highlight the importance of critical discourse awareness in enabling individuals to recognize manipulation, challenge dominant narratives, and engage more actively in social processes. Ultimately, discourse is presented as a dynamic and transformative force that continuously reconstructs social reality.

Keywords - Critical discourse, Digital discourse, Discourse analysis, Ideology, Language and power, Social reality.

1. Introduction

Language is often perceived as a simple tool for exchanging information; however, this view significantly underestimates its power and complexity. In contemporary linguistics, discourse is understood not merely as a sequence of sentences, but as a dynamic and multifaceted system through which social reality is constructed, maintained, and continuously transformed. Discourse encompasses not only spoken and written language, but also the underlying assumptions, cultural norms, values, and ideologies embedded within communication practices (Fairclough, 1995; Halliday, 1978). From this perspective, language functions as a form of social action rather than a neutral medium, actively shaping how individuals interpret and engage with the world around them. Furthermore, discourse operates within broader social and institutional contexts, where meaning is negotiated and reinforced through repeated patterns of communication. As Berger and Luckmann (1966) argue, reality is not objectively given but socially constructed through interaction, with language serving as the primary vehicle for this construction. In this sense, discourse plays a central role in organizing knowledge, establishing norms, and defining what is considered acceptable or “true” within a particular society (Foucault, 1972). These processes highlight the intrinsic connection between language, knowledge, and power, suggesting that discourse is both shaped by and shapes social structures. In modern society, where communication is increasingly mediated by digital technologies, discourse has become even more influential and pervasive. News media, political speeches, social networks, and educational institutions all contribute to shaping how individuals perceive and interpret reality. The way events are described, the vocabulary chosen, and the perspectives emphasized all play a crucial role in constructing meaning and guiding public understanding (Richardson, 2007; van Dijk, 2008). For instance, media representations

often frame social issues in particular ways, thereby influencing public opinion and policy responses. Similarly, political discourse strategically employs linguistic devices such as metaphors and euphemisms to shape ideological perspectives and legitimize certain actions (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

Moreover, the rise of digital communication has intensified the speed and reach of discourse, allowing ideas to spread rapidly across global networks. However, this also raises concerns about the manipulation of information, the spread of misinformation, and the reinforcement of ideological biases. Online platforms often create environments where specific discourses dominate, limiting exposure to alternative viewpoints and contributing to the formation of echo chambers (Blommaert, 2005; Gee, 2011). As a result, discourse not only reflects social reality but actively participates in its ongoing reconstruction.

This paper argues that discourse is not merely a passive reflection of reality but an active and transformative force in its construction. By examining key theoretical perspectives and real-world examples, the study demonstrates how discourse shapes knowledge, reinforces or challenges power structures, and constructs individual and collective identities. Through a critical analysis of language use across different domains, this research aims to highlight the profound impact of discourse on social life and emphasize the importance of developing critical awareness in interpreting and producing discourse.

2. Materials and Methods

The materials used in this study consist of both theoretical sources and illustrative discourse examples drawn from various domains of social communication. The theoretical framework is based on key works in discourse analysis, including the contributions of scholars such as Foucault (1972), Fairclough (1995), van Dijk (2008), Gee (2011), and Halliday (1978). These sources provide the conceptual foundation for understanding discourse as a social practice closely linked to power, ideology, and knowledge construction.

In addition to theoretical literature, the study utilizes examples of discourse from media texts, political communication, and digital platforms. These examples include news discourse, political rhetoric, and online communication practices, which serve as representative instances of how language is used to construct social reality. The selected materials are not limited to a specific dataset but are intended to illustrate recurring patterns of discourse across different contexts. Furthermore, examples such as lexical choices (e.g., “unemployed individuals” versus “job seekers”), metaphorical framing in political language, and communicative practices in digital environments are employed to demonstrate how discourse operates in shaping perception and meaning. These materials are used as qualitative evidence to support the analytical arguments presented in the study. This research adopts a qualitative and interpretative approach grounded in discourse analysis. The study primarily employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as its main methodological framework, following the model proposed by Fairclough (1995). This approach enables the examination of the relationship between language, power, and ideology by analyzing discourse at three interconnected levels: textual analysis, discursive practices, and social practices. At the textual level, the study focuses on linguistic features such as vocabulary, metaphor, and framing strategies used in different types of discourse. At the level of discursive practice, attention is given to how texts are produced, distributed, and consumed within institutional and social contexts. At the level of social practice, the analysis explores how discourse contributes to broader social structures, including power relations, ideological formations, and identity construction. In addition, the study incorporates a socio-cognitive perspective based on van Dijk’s (2008) approach, which examines how discourse influences mental models, shared knowledge, and collective beliefs. This allows for a deeper understanding of how discourse shapes not only social interaction but also cognition and perception. The research also employs elements of qualitative content analysis to identify recurring themes and patterns across different discourse types, including media discourse, political language, and digital communication. Through this method, the study systematically examines how specific linguistic choices and communicative strategies contribute to the construction of social reality.

Overall, the methodological approach of this study is descriptive, analytical, and interpretative. It does not rely on quantitative data or statistical analysis but instead focuses on an in-depth examination of discourse as a dynamic and socially embedded phenomenon.

3. Results

3.1. *Discourse as a Constructor of Social Reality*

Language plays a fundamental role in shaping human perception and organizing social experience. Rather than merely reflecting an objective external world, language actively participates in constructing the reality individuals perceive and interact with. Berger and Luckmann (1966) argue that reality is socially constructed through everyday interactions, where language serves as the primary medium for creating, maintaining, and transmitting shared meanings. Through repeated communicative practices, individuals internalize socially accepted interpretations of the world, which eventually become normalized and taken for granted.

From this perspective, discourse functions as a central mechanism through which knowledge is produced and structured. It enables individuals to categorize experiences, assign meaning to events, and construct social norms. As Halliday (1978) suggests, language operates as a social semiotic system, meaning that it encodes cultural and social meanings that guide human behavior. Consequently, discourse does not simply describe reality; it actively shapes how reality is understood and experienced. This idea aligns with Foucault's (1972) view that discourse defines the boundaries of knowledge by determining what can be said, thought, and considered valid within a given context.

Media discourse, political language, and digital communication all provide clear examples of how discourse constructs social reality through processes such as framing, metaphor, and representation. In media contexts, for instance, the way events are framed significantly influences public perception. A single event can be interpreted in multiple ways depending on the linguistic choices used to present it. As Richardson (2007) demonstrates, news discourse often reflects institutional ideologies, shaping how audiences understand social and political issues. Similarly, van Dijk (2008) emphasizes that media discourse plays a crucial role in controlling public knowledge and reinforcing dominant perspectives.

Political discourse further illustrates the constructive power of language. Through the use of metaphors, slogans, and strategic lexical choices, political actors shape how issues are conceptualized and debated. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue that metaphors are not merely stylistic devices but fundamental cognitive tools that structure how individuals think about complex issues. For example, framing economic challenges as a "battle" or "crisis" evokes urgency and influences public response. Such linguistic strategies demonstrate how discourse can guide interpretation and legitimize particular actions or policies.

Consider the difference between the terms:

"unemployed individuals"

"job seekers"

While both refer to the same group, the second expression carries a more positive and active connotation. Such linguistic choices influence how individuals perceive social groups and issues. In addition, digital communication has expanded the scope and speed of discourse construction. Online platforms enable individuals to participate in the creation and dissemination of discourse on an unprecedented scale. However, this also leads to the rapid spread of competing narratives, misinformation, and ideologically driven content. As Blommaert (2005) notes, discourse in a globalized digital environment is highly dynamic, shaped by diverse cultural and social influences. Gee (2011) further emphasizes that discourse communities in digital spaces develop their own norms and meanings, contributing to the continuous reconstruction of social reality.

Overall, discourse operates as a powerful and dynamic force that constructs social reality across multiple domains. Through everyday interactions, institutional communication, and digital engagement, language shapes how individuals perceive the world, understand social issues, and position themselves within society. Recognizing the constructive role of discourse is essential for developing a critical awareness of how meaning is produced and how reality itself is continuously negotiated and redefined.

3.2. Discourse, Power, and Ideology

Discourse is deeply embedded in power relations and serves as a key mechanism through which power is exercised and maintained in society. Rather than being neutral, discourse reflects the interests of those who have access to and control over communicative resources. Those who dominate communication channels—such as governments, media institutions, and educational systems—play a crucial role in shaping how reality is represented, interpreted, and understood by the public. In this way, discourse becomes a powerful tool for influencing perception and guiding social behavior (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 2008).

Van Dijk (2008) highlights that elite groups control discourse production and distribution, allowing them to shape public opinion. For instance:

- News outlets may prioritize certain stories over others
- Political narratives may exclude minority voices

This selective representation reinforces existing power structures. From a Foucauldian perspective, power operates through discourse by establishing what is considered legitimate knowledge and acceptable truth. Foucault (1972) argues that discourse produces “regimes of truth,” within which certain ideas are normalized while others are excluded or marginalized. This process is often subtle and taken for granted, making it difficult for individuals to recognize how their perceptions are shaped by dominant discourses. As a result, discourse not only reflects existing power structures but actively contributes to their reproduction and stabilization.

Ideology plays a central role in this process. Ideologies are systems of beliefs and values that shape how individuals interpret the world, and they are often embedded within discourse in implicit ways. According to van Dijk (2008), discourse is one of the primary means through which ideologies are communicated, reproduced, and internalized by members of a society. For example, media discourse may present certain groups in stereotypical ways, reinforcing social inequalities and legitimizing discriminatory practices. Such representations influence public attitudes and contribute to the maintenance of unequal power relations.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) provides a useful framework for examining the relationship between discourse, power, and ideology. Fairclough (1995) emphasizes that discourse both shapes and is shaped by social structures, particularly in contexts where power imbalances exist. CDA seeks to uncover hidden ideological meanings within texts and to reveal how language is used to sustain dominance and control. Wodak and Meyer (2009) further argue that discourse analysis should not only describe linguistic patterns but also critically engage with the social consequences of these patterns. Moreover, discourse has the capacity not only to reinforce power but also to challenge and transform it. Alternative discourses—often emerging from marginalized groups—can resist dominant narratives and propose new ways of understanding social reality. For instance, social movements frequently use discourse strategically to reframe issues, raise awareness, and promote social change. This demonstrates that discourse is not a fixed or one-directional force but a dynamic arena where power is constantly negotiated and contested (Blommaert, 2005; Gee, 2011). Generally, discourse, power, and ideology are inextricably linked. Through discourse, power is exercised, ideologies are transmitted, and social realities are constructed and maintained. At the same time, discourse also provides opportunities for resistance and transformation, making it a central element in the ongoing struggle over meaning and social order.

4. Discussion

Discourse analysis is an interdisciplinary field that integrates insights from linguistics, sociology, anthropology, philosophy, and communication studies. Rather than focusing solely on the structure of language, discourse analysis examines how language is used in real-life contexts to produce meaning, organize knowledge, and shape social relations. It views language as a form of social practice that both reflects and constructs reality (Gee, 2011; Halliday, 1978). This broader perspective allows researchers to explore how discourse operates within institutional, cultural, and historical frameworks, revealing the underlying mechanisms through which meaning is produced and maintained.

One of the most influential thinkers in this field, Foucault (1972), introduced a radically new understanding of discourse by linking it to power and knowledge. According to Foucault, discourse does not simply describe the world; rather, it defines what can be said, thought, and known within a particular historical and social context. In this sense, discourse establishes the boundaries of knowledge by determining what is considered legitimate, true, or acceptable. Foucault further argues that power is exercised through discourse, as dominant institutions—such as governments, media, and academia—control the production and distribution of knowledge. This process leads to the normalization of certain ideas while marginalizing others, thereby shaping social reality in subtle but powerful ways (Foucault, 1972; Blommaert, 2005).

Building on this theoretical foundation, Fairclough (1995) developed Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which explicitly focuses on the relationship between language, power, and ideology. CDA views discourse as both shaped by social structures and actively shaping them in return. Fairclough proposes a three-dimensional model of discourse analysis, which includes the analysis of textual features, discursive practices, and broader social practices. This framework enables researchers to examine how language contributes to the reproduction of social inequalities, such as class, gender, and ethnic disparities (Fairclough, 1995; Wodak & Meyer, 2009). Moreover, CDA emphasizes the importance of uncovering hidden ideologies embedded in discourse, particularly those that sustain dominance and control.

In addition to the critical perspective, van Dijk (2008) highlights the cognitive dimension of discourse, offering a socio-cognitive approach that connects language use with mental processes. According to van Dijk, discourse influences how individuals construct mental models of events, people, and social situations. These mental models, in turn, shape shared knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes within a community. He argues that controlling discourse—especially through influential platforms such as media and political communication—enables powerful groups to shape public cognition and maintain ideological dominance. This perspective underscores the role of discourse not only in social interaction but also in the formation of collective consciousness (van Dijk, 2008).

Furthermore, contemporary discourse analysis recognizes that discourse operates across multiple levels, including micro-level interactions (such as conversations), meso-level institutional practices, and macro-level societal structures. This multi-layered approach allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how discourse functions in different contexts. For instance, institutional discourse in education or law often follows specific conventions that reflect broader power dynamics and social expectations (Gee, 2011).

5. Conclusion

Discourse is a fundamental mechanism through which social reality is constructed and maintained. It shapes how individuals perceive the world, interpret events, and understand social relationships. Through everyday communication, discourse influences beliefs and attitudes, often making certain ideas appear natural or “normal” (Fairclough, 1995; Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Across media, politics, education, and daily interaction, discourse organizes human experience by framing information in specific ways. Media and political discourse, in particular, guide public understanding by selecting what is emphasized and how it is presented (van Dijk, 2008). In everyday

life, repeated linguistic patterns also reinforce cultural norms and shared assumptions. At the same time, discourse can both support and challenge power structures. While dominant discourses often reflect the interests of powerful groups, alternative voices can question and resist these narratives (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). This shows that meaning in society is not fixed but constantly negotiated. Ultimately, discourse is not only a reflection of reality but also a tool that actively shapes and transforms it.

Data Availability

No external dataset was used in this study. All examples and materials analyzed are included within the article.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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Authors' Contributions

The author contributed to all aspects of the study, including conceptualization, methodology, data analysis, writing, and revision of the manuscript.

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