

Presenting Selves Through Language: A Social Psychological Approach to Discourse Analysis

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“All the world is a stage , and
all the men and women are merely
players”.

W. Shakespeare, *As You Like It*

Özet

Söylem çözümlemesi, dilbilim alanında olduğu kadar, dil kullanımıyla ilişkisi olan toplumbilim, ruhbilim, toplumsal ruhbilim gibi alanlarda da farklı amaçlarla ele alınmaktadır.

Toplumsal ruhbilimsel bir yaklaşım içinde söylem çözümlemesi, bireyin öz-kimliğine (self-identity) ve toplumsal kimliğine (social-identity) ilişkin veriler sunabilir. Birey, özellikle toplumsal öz-bilinçlilikle (public self-consciousness), toplumsal dilsel ölçütlere, konumuna, eğitimine, kişiliğine, kısa-/ uzun- dönemli amaç ve beklentilerine, bireylerarası ilişkinin niteliğine göre söylemiyle ilgili bir takım seçimler yapabilmektedir. Dil kullanımıyla ilgili bu seçimlerin bireyin hem öz-, hem de toplumsal kimliğiyle bağlantılı bilinçli ya da bilinçsiz seçimler olduğu, ve söylem çözümlemesi içinde bireyle ilgili birçok bulgu edinilebileceği düşünülmektedir.

Abstract

Discourse analysis has been carried out with different goals in the language-related disciplines such as linguistics, sociology, psychology and social psychology.

Within a social psychological perspective, discourse analysis can provide data in relation to one's self- and social identity. Individual's communicative and self-staging

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strategies and choice of various forms of language may give signs of his status, educational or social background, his self-esteem, public self-consciousness, his linguistic and behavioral monitoring as well as his psychological state.

I. Introduction

From the early years on, we get into a complex process of gaining a sense of identity. The consequences of this process reflect a schema consisting of an organized collection of beliefs and feelings about oneself (personal-/ self-identity), and of aspects shared with others in a social context (social identity) (Baron & Byrne , 1997). Although the responses to be given to the question "Who am I ?" would suggest something about one's identity at a certain period of time, the overall framework of identity presents various degrees of complexity in which the gradual change of self-concept is also observed. In other words, people may produce different self-descriptions or self-presentations over time and also with respect to several role-specific contexts. Existence of various categories of self-identity, tied to both personal and interpersonal world, reflects such behavioral patterns that the observation of these can be, or has been the subjects of a good number of psychological, sociological, and social psychological studies. On the other hand, it is possible to observe the reflections of one's personal and social identity in verbal interactions (Levinson , 1980; Clark, 1985; Goffman, 1959, 1961, 1963, 1967, 1971, 1974). The spoken language one employs has important self-presentational features. Besides the contributions made by linguists, who have tended to conceive of discourse from a structural or textual perspective, studies on discourse contributed by other disciplines have developed different perspectives.

Indeed, discourse analysis can be done with a variety of goals in mind : Those who are interested in the working of the mind in delivering, processing and storing information primarily focus on cognitive processes as they analyze discourse (Clark & Clark, 1977 ; Cicourel, 1974; Sperber & Wilson, 1986). It is possible to analyze discourse to search for regularities, irregularities or frequencies in languages, or to search for the social structure as reflected in interactions (Clark, 1985; Cicourel, 1978). A suggested idea is that an interdisciplinary- rather than multidisciplinary- approach and cooperation among language-related sciences can help the formation of metatheories with more explanatory power in the issues of communication (St. Clair, 1980; Smith, P. M., Giles, H. & Hewstone, M., 1980

In social psychology, many studies on discourse analysis underline the fact that communicative abilities employed by individuals in changing social contexts form an important part of impression management strategies. The purpose of this paper is to explain how language use can function as a self-presenting medium in different social contexts.

II. Ways of Presenting Selves Through Processes of Discourse

A careful observer of any conversation between two speakers at a certain point of time can easily draw conclusions about the participants' social roles, positions, educational and social backgrounds, dialects, intimacy, observance of the linguistic rules of etiquette, political leanings and even their cognitive abilities up to a certain degree. However considerable these conclusions may be, one thing which is certain is that individuals do not always display the same communicative strategies, nor do they display the same identity in every social context they are in. In other words, communicative strategies of individuals are conducted in such a way that they fit the impression management strategies employed in that context.

Goffman (1959,1961,1963,1967,1971,1974,1976), who emphasized the presentation of self in conversational structure, approaches the issue starting with "the territories of self ". According to Goffman, communication is possible only when individual decides on "giving up some of the boundaries and barriers that ordinarily separate them" (Goffman, 1971 : 52).It is only then the actual discourse gets a start, but discourse does not simply mean chaining linguistic units or interactional moves devoid of individual's cognitive abilities or devoid of his self-presentational concerns. In *Frame Analysis*, Goffman says individual's ability to use discourse for impression management is an important phenomenon, because this way the individual is not only an ordinary participant in a conversation, but also a careful principal, strategist, animator and figure who simultaneously employs his cognitive, linguistic, paralinguistic ,communicative and self-staging abilities. He seeks for an "appreciation of a show put on" (Goffman, 1974).

The effects of impression management on discourse processes can be observed in many ways in daily encounters. The choice of language is important in maintaining social relationships. The status difference between two speakers is represented in the way the junior addresses the senior or vice - versa. For the person of lower status, the choice of address to the one of higher status presents forms based on "power semantic" (Brown & Gilman, 1960). "The power semantic is the power or status level that a conversant holds"(Feldman,1998 : 144). However, a change in this formality level may occur at the behest of the higher status person who would ask the lower status one to address him more informally. While this decision shows some aspects of the higher-status self in relation to his impression management, it also gives signs of his degree of appreciation of the other person. The readiness of the lower-status self to accept this offer may be linked to how he perceives the transparency of the other party, as well as what sort of self-esteem he has developed, or how he stages self-protection strategies.It should also be kept in mind that the choice of address, especially in the second person pronoun, is closely related to the educational and social backgrounds of the speakers (for a detailed study on the choice of second person pronouns in Turkish see Konig, 1990).

It is another observed phenomenon that the choice of language in discourse processes is related to public self-consciousness. Public self-consciousness refers to one's awareness of and concerns about how he is perceived by the others in accordance with societal norms (Feldman, 1998). Thus, people with high public self-consciousness will not only care for their behavioral impressions, but also for the type of discourse they employ in interactions, because the language use of individual can easily give away his personal or social identity. This is a part of the self-monitoring process as well. One's use of language reflects how much he can regulate his linguistic strategies to meet the demands of a situation or the expectations of others. A person with high public self-consciousness and with high self-monitoring awareness will develop linguistically high self-monitors as well. This fact will most probably reflect in his choice of vocabulary, register, observance of the other rules of linguistic etiquette, observance of making grammatically well-formed and understandable sentences, and so on. Take a politician, for example, whose self-presentation in society matters a lot for him, and he needs to nurture his image. His linguistic self-monitoring will probably necessitate his regulation of the discourse according to the group of people he addresses. If the group addressed has predictable expectations, or if the politician needs to give the impression that he is "one of them", his sense of public self-consciousness will urge him to regulate his speech or even pronunciation according to the linguistic norms of the group. May it be because of a growing sense of public self-consciousness that some people among those who have moved to modern cities from rural areas - it is said the ratio is higher in women - gradually get attentive to how other citizens see them? One consequence can be observed as regulating or improving certain patterns of behavior and language (mostly dialect or vocabulary-wise), even though inappropriate use of newly learned or overheard words and phrases in certain contexts leap up.

Another example of one's keeping tab on his discourse for personality concerns can be seen in mother and child relations. A loving and caring mother can easily turn out to be an authoritarian figure when she demands obedience from the child. In this case, mother's discourse will display short, imperative sentences or threats with a change in the voice tone, because she thinks her usual linguistic attitude or self-presentation cannot manage the ongoing situation. In addition to the given examples, one's discourse may be a medium in presenting selves regarding his political or religious leanings. Tannen (1994) mentions that a person who always addresses women as "Ms.", rather than "Mrs." or "Miss", may be revealing his views on feminism. Similarly, the consistently repeated words of religion throughout one's discourse may give hints on his values or political choice. Someone who is over-reactive in interactions and whose discourse means hurting others when there are good reasons to behave or speak otherwise, can be said to be displaying signs of self-protection to conceal low self-esteem. Examples can be multiplied.

III. Conclusion

Depending on what has been mentioned so far, we may ask the following questions in relation to discourse analysis from a social psychological perspective :

1. Who is talking to whom and where ?
2. What's the purpose of communication ?
3. What's the self-impression that the speaker wants to present ?
4. What sort of impression management strategies does the speaker employ as he speaks ?
5. What is the self-esteem function of the speaker ?
6. What is the speaker's sense of self-identity?
7. How far does the speaker count for self-protection ?
8. Does the speaker strive to make the other(s) see him as he really is or not ?
9. How does the speaker employ his language monitoring strategies ?
10. Does the speaker aim at giving political messages as he speaks ?

It goes without saying that adequate data to answer the above questions require elaborate empirical research on actual discourse, preferably with audio-visual recordings. Personality traits are more particularly observed and studied within the field of psychology, but linguistic and social psychological perspectives in discourse analysis can together help the understanding of social control through words and actions.

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