reviews

Spoken Discourse

Rodney H. Jones

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In the opening chapter of this book, Rodney Jones who is professor of Sociolinguistics and New Media at the University of Reading, UK poses the question 'What is spoken discourse?' His answer is that people use conversations to manage their lives: to get things done, to form and maintain relationships, to enact certain kinds of social identities and to participate in social groups. He then illustrates the complexity involved in spoken discourse by the following conversation.

> Son: Can I tell you something?
>
> Dad: Yeah.
>
> Son: Will you love me? Period?
>
> Dad: Yes.
>
> Son: Like you'll always love me, as long as I'm …
>
> Dad: Don't worry.
>
> Son: Dad I'm gay.
>
> Dad: Gay?

Such a conversion, Jones states has its own set of 'rules'. This is not just a son and father chatting on the phone. They are doing something very

specific: they are engaged in a practice of 'coming out'. 'Coming out' is governed by a particular set of discourse conventions. People engaged in the genre of '*coming out*' have well defined set of actions that they need to accomplish. Basically, there would be a **revelation** and a **response**. There is only *one particular **topic***, the sexuality of the person carrying out the revelation. You can infer a number of things about the relationship between the two speakers from this telephone conversation and imagine what might have been going on inside their heads. More importantly, you may have some idea whether it was successful or not. In this case the response of the father seems rather unsatisfactory ('Gay?') could be interpreted as a request for clarification or an expression of surprise.

However, because of the importance of this interaction, it is not just about the *revelation* but there is also *preparation*. In this case the preparation can be found in the three questions:

'Can I tell you something?' 'Will you love me?' 'Like you'll always love me.'

The delay in the *revelation* signals something difficult for the son to say and perhaps, for the father to accept. The question also implies an eliciting, a kind of promise from the father as to the response. The "always love me" will make it more difficult for the father to choose a response that will indicate rejection.

Spoken discourse always involves people *doing* something and these may involve multiple social practices. With such a short transcript, we cannot really be sure what is being said although we can *infer* a lot about what is going on, in fact there may be a lot more going on. One of the main challenges about studying spoken discourse is that our knowledge of the social interactions is always somehow incomplete, what is really meant? This involves reading between the lines as the transcription presented here doesn't give us much information on '*how* it was said.' Indeed to really understand any linguistic communication we need to have the *background*.

In the past, the notion was that spoken language was a 'talking heads' model; each person sending and receiving messages to one another (Saussure 1916,). Chomsky, (1965) took this one stage further in a cognitive and individualized direction and such an orientation continues to influence SLA and language teaching pedagogies. Too often in teaching what is presented in many text-books where spoken language is simulated is simply seen as a transmission from brain to brain. Such a model assumes an unproblematic pathway from the brain of one participant to the brain of the other through the medium of spoken language. However, Jones, in this book argues that apart from the fact that such a view of 'spoken language' is inadequate to represent speech in all its complexity; there is now the much greater dominance of technologies through which 'spoken' language can now be mediated, (including telephones, computers, television, gestures and facial expressions). The 'talking-heads' analogy has to some extent distorted reality by presenting 'spoken' discourse as the exclusive way language can be used in communicating, thus ignoring the other forms of technology that people use when engaging in social action.

In chapter 3 Jones writes about *Technology of talk,* having 'tool-kits' extending the oral use of language through technologies. The borders between written and spoken discourse are mainly concerned with two things: the way we 'package' what we say and how we arrange these 'packages' to create a flow of communication. Such tools are 'saturated' by context and are variable, locally adapted, never quite the same and constantly adjusting to the world. In fact we almost always employ multiple modes at the same time and not simply the oral features of language. This means that that the kinds of meanings that we are able to make with one mode are dependent on the other modes that are deployed along with it. Computers screens can be the carriers of writing; as well as the carrier of spoken language; and the carrier of modes like gaze, gesture and posture.

Spoken discourse, then, is primarily on how language is used in 'doing' something, rather than studying language as an abstract system. **'Doing'**

means that the aim is not so much in analyzing 'sentences' but 'utterances' in real-time, in other words, instances of language as it is 'used'. Foucault (1971) argued that our practices of using language and creating regulating texts must end up in not just constraining the way we talk and write, but also the way we think, the kinds of identities we can have, and the kinds of relationships of power. Studying 'spoken discourse', therefore is about more than just studying language: conversation always involves an array of mediational means, both physical and semiotic.

For example, Jones cities the events in 2014 when university students in Hong Kong protested against a plan for constitutional reform (he was teaching there at that time). One of the main symbols of protest was the yellow umbrella, technologized as the emblem of the movement. During the degree conferring in one of the universities, a student knelt before the president and offered him a folded yellow umbrella. The president refused to accept it and did not present the diploma to the student. What this illustrates is in this *handing over* and *not handing over* there was no 'speech' involved, but can be clearly regarded as a form of spoken discourse.

So what does Jones' 'Coming out' extract tell us about 'spoken discourse in the opening chapter? Our perception of the conversation between the Son and Father changed as we *'zoomed in'* when the transcription was presented in more detail, indicating the pauses and intonation giving much more feedback on the general tone of the conversation. 'Zooming-out' revealed the larger context of a telephone conversation. It was from 'YouTube' video reflecting the larger historical moment of the U.S. military 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell 'policy that was in the process of being lifted.

What conclusion can we draw for our classroom teaching of 'spoken discourse'? Our students understanding of what is going on in spoken discourse can be radically changed depending on the circumstances we draw around the people and the interactions under study. However in too many educational contexts all we present to our students is simply the

'language' uncontextualised with a minimal of 'zooming in' and rarely any 'zooming out'.

I strongly recommend this book as an example of how we can rethink the way we teach spoken discourse especially when mediated through a complex of technology. The engaging examples shed light on spoken language which without the context would be simply empty 'talking heads'.

References

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