

Niches and cynosures in the formation of discourses

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Basing on the findings of Halliday, Coulthard, and Hoey, one can assume that discourse might be identified with a socially and culturally embedded type of text. Having taken that viewpoint, we decided to specify the subject matter of our paper as a search for those extra-linguistic factors that co-determine the properties of texts being processed in discursive environments of human communication. Inspired by the Goffman frame analysis, the Gumperz interactional sociolinguistics, and Hymes' concept of communicative competence, we will try to build up our position on the relationships among discourse, text, and language introducing two new notions that seem to be useful in explaining the continuity of meaning creation as well as the transmission and reception of meaning bearers, namely the discursive niche and cynosure. These two interrelated notions, integrating several proposals made hitherto by language philosophers and practitioners of linguistic disciplines, will be discussed in terms of constraints on verbal communication, or its determinants, that condition the occurrence of particular types of texts in specific communicative events. To model the nature of such constraints and determinants, it will be necessary to follow not only the achievements of text linguists and discourse theorists, but also the findings of researchers working within, for instance, sociolinguistics, linguistic pragmatics, or theory of communication – that is, other disciplines investigating how far communicating individuals, as members of various social groupings and representatives of diverse cultures, influence the creation of meanings in interpersonal symbolic interactions.

To reveal the character of the discursive niche, where language becomes materialized in the form of texts, we will consider *inter alia* the following variables pertaining to multifarious dimensions of human communication: (1) patterns of power relations among interacting individuals – the problem central to the writings of Foucault, Habermas, and critical discourse analysts, (2) identified by theoreticians of communication forms of symbolic interactions that shape human linkages in dyadic, small-group, public, and mass communication, (3) domains of human life in which interactions are located, as considered in the sociolinguistics of Fishman, and in the philosophy of Bourdieu, (4) types of common goals that interacting individuals usually pursue, recognized by Vanderveken while expanding on the speech act theory of Austin and Searle. It will be shown that the knowledge of niches, being part of the knowledge that members of a discursive community share intersubjectively, may function as a frame of reference in which communicating individuals become aware of their place and role in a particular symbolic interaction. Subsequently, the discursive niche will be regarded as an environment in which specific subject-oriented cynosures may emerge. Such a cynosure – to be defined as an object of any ontological status (material or mental) accompanied by its interpretation – draws the attention of individuals practicing the exchanges of verbal signs within a particular niche, who, as a result, develop it into the thematic content of the texts they produce. Therefore, it will be pointed out that the formation of any discourse type in any niche might be seen as an ongoing accumulation of generalizations that participants in communication make about the features of particular texts centered on a given discursive cynosure. Moreover, an attempt will be made to demonstrate that niches and cynosures, once identified in the context of discursive practices, might serve at least three purposes of extended linguistic studies: firstly, they may be used as criteria for a discourse-oriented typology of texts; secondly, they may be helpful in elucidating the evolution of discourses; and, finally, they may be employed as tools for describing the ways in which discourses of various human communities differ.