

Discourse in the context of language history – research potential and perspectives

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1. Preliminary findings

Language history faces new challenges today, including methodological ones. Given the trend to widen the boundaries of academic reflection by going beyond the discipline, which, in the case of the humanities, means primarily the adoption of cultural and social perspectives¹, historical language studies increasingly focus on non-systematic issues today. Such an account is promising as it presents language as a cultural and social phenomenon and as a component of communication in its broadest sense. In view of the above, discourse is a useful tool in contemporary language history.

Discourse is one of the concepts that model and dynamise contemporary humanistic and social reflection. It is a cognitive category that greatly inspires for further research in the issues already present in scientific thought.

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¹ The acceptance of the thesis of the inter- and transdisciplinarity of contemporary language history no longer requires justification (e.g., Pastuch 2018). Historians, among others, come to the same conclusion (Domańska 2010).



This paper does not adopt a single definition of discourse as it seems that this concept, as an open category, fluctuates, has the potential to adapt to the subject of research, and grows out of specific research practices of given academic communities. Following Bożena Witosz's approach, the paper agrees that discourse is a relative rather than an ambiguous category and accepts the thesis of the distinctiveness of discourse and text, the ideational character of discourse, and its relativisation against other models of text (especially genre and style) (Witosz 2016: 20–22). The features of discourse, as an operational concept of contemporary humanistic, social, and linguistic reflection, include the significant role of thought patterns shaping the perspective of a given community, the temporal and spatial context, and sociocultural and sociocognitive potential of discourse (Witosz 2016: 27)². In this context, it is worth concluding with Norman Fairclough's synthetic definition, "A discourse is a way of signifying a particular domain of social practice from a particular perspective" (Fairclough 1995: 14, as cited in Wodak 2008: 189).

2. Language history and discourse – broadening the field of research

It seems that the interplay between discourse studies and language history may prove inspiring for both. Although, in general terms, post-structuralist linguistics abolishes the distinction between diachrony and synchrony, replacing it with, for example, the operational yet ambiguous³ notion of panchrony, it seems that some reflection on the historical aspects of communication can yield interesting observations on the complex phenomenon of discourse. It seems relevant, especially because of the possibility of grasping the dynamics of discourse and clarifying its defining characteristics, both in general terms and in specific types of discourse. There is no contradiction with panchronic principles as the transformations observed in this approach generally have an overwhelming impact on the contemporary state.

General comments made in this paper will be set in the context of the empirical research. The references cited will mainly refer to two types of discourse — the scientific discourse and the discourse of the excluded.

² cf. Witosz 2009.

³ cf., e.g., Łozowski 1999.

There are many benefits to contextualising the concept of discourse in language history. As research has shown and as my experience as a language historian suggests, discourse sometimes turns out to be a level, a phenomenon, or an area of communication that makes it possible to freely and holistically observe the transformations of communication in its specific manifestations. Regardless of the concept adopted and whether the discourse is positioned hierarchically to related concepts (text, style, genre) (Wojtak 2010) or relatively to them (Witosz 2009, 2016), the language historian often remains helpless in the face of the fluidity of the phenomena studied and the incompatibility of various labels, including generic ones. This is the case, for example, with research on the scientific variety of the old Polish language. Medical texts written in Polish, dating back to 16th and 17th centuries, require generic classification. Commonly referred to as herbaria, they lack many of the characteristics ascribed to them in later centuries. Instead, they have the clear features of a guidebook, encyclopaedia, or treatise. Moreover, they are polyphonic and their individual parts often bear the hallmarks of different genre forms. There are many reasons for this, such as basing scientific texts on foreign models (translations, adaptations), the Polish-Latin bilingualism of scientific communication in ancient times and the resulting different roles of texts written in each of these languages, and a combination of sociocultural factors (the status of medicine, the role of the doctor, the state of knowledge at the time, etc.). It is possible to approach this issue from the perspective of linguistic genology, pointing to various phenomena accompanying the transformations of genre forms, including the labels of a given generic form (e.g., Rejter 2000, Przyklenk 2009, Pietrzak 2013, Gajda 2020), or to look from a different perspective and consider a given group of texts as representing a specific type of discourse. This eliminates terminological problems and identifies new analytical tropes related, for example, to particular categories of discourse studies that are elusive in a strictly genological approach (Rejter, 2018, 2020, 2022, in press b).

Similar measures to broaden and reinterpret the research instrumentation are evidence of further significant changes taking place within stylistics, which, having long since shifted its weight to higher levels of communication⁴,

⁴ This applies to historical language studies in general as confirmed by researchers in their synthetic works. Stanisław Dubisz (2010: 45–48) believes that the last of the distinguishable stages of reflection in language history in Poland consists in the valuation of two paradigms: structuralist and cognitive.

covers more and more areas of communication and, by adopting a discourse studies perspective, takes on the value of a subdiscipline within the domain of interpretation covering cultural and social conclusions. This also applies to historically-inclined stylistics which noticeably **broadens the reflection**.

3. Discourse and language history – broadening the scope of the concept

The reverse relation, namely the different influences of the language history on the notion of discourse and approaches to discourse, is also interesting. The consequence of these influences is that the notion of discourse can be **(re)modelled**. This is due to the fact that historical language studies cause some limitations, primarily due to the type of sources and the degree of immersion of the researcher in the various communicative, social, and cultural contexts of a given era. With regard to earlier eras, the language historian has only sources in the form of fixed texts, usually written, supplemented incidentally by visual material. Over time, other types of texts, such as audio and audiovisual recordings, can also be used in research. However, this largely applies to the 20th and 21st centuries only. The same is true for non-verbal contexts that play a significant role in discourse studies. Awareness of temporal spatial, sociocultural, and sociocognitive backgrounds increases with the passage of time and as a given era is mentally brought closer to the present day.

These issues can be observed in two different discourses covered by the historical analysis. The scientific medical discourse of ancient times can be described using the available source materials, i.e., the already mentioned herbaria, which are written texts with iconic elements (engravings). The interpretative context is thanks to the researcher's awareness of the state of medical knowledge of the time, the scientific heritage, immersion in ancient medical traditions (e.g., the theory of four elements), and the specific character of the literature of the time (scientific and any other), based on the use of foreign models, their adaptations, translations, and alterations, to varying degrees faithful to the original. Furthermore, note that science was embedded

Stanislaw Borawski (2002: 45–65), speaks of the latest trend of historical language studies to observe functional, stylistic, and regional contexts.

in two areas of functioning. Until the 17th or even 18th century, science, in its theoretical and academic variety, was practised in Latin. Polish-language texts usually performed purely utilitarian functions and were intended to serve practical applications of scientific knowledge. Additionally, there is a strictly linguistic and stylistic context that is difficult to overestimate. Research on the oldest scientific texts confirms their significant role in the crystallisation of a distinct functional variety of Polish as they contain many linguistic and textual features ascribed to the scientific style and discourse fully formed in the 19th century (cf., e.g., Ostaszewska 1994, Biniewicz 2002, Bajerowa 2008).

Other possibilities are offered by the study of discourses functioning in the not-so-distant past as evidenced by the attempts to capture the transformations of the discourse of the excluded on the example of the discourse of Polish LGBTQ+ communities, which has been functioning to a noticeable extent only since the 1980s. In the case of this discourse, the researcher is left with various forms of its update (private and public written texts, journals, iconic and audiovisual materials, the possibility of interviewing representatives of the LGBTQ+ community, etc.), a far greater awareness of the contexts in which it functions, the possibility of reaching out to representatives of the discourse, participation in it, etc. (Rejter, 2021, in press a).

In both cases presented, discourse remains a concept subject to (re)modelling, which depends on the moment on the timeline at which it functions. The transformations of scientific discourse, consisting primarily in its consistent emancipation, clear crystallisation (19th and 20th centuries), and over time, especially in the humanities and social sciences, essayisation and postmodern nebulosity (20th and 21st centuries), affect its understanding and status determination in the field of communication and culture of a given era. Similarly, the discourse of the excluded comes out of hiding and its underground, niche, or even subcultural character gives way to characteristics such as emancipation, openness, and confrontation with the discourses of domination.

These changes can be seen as evidence of transformations within a given discourse and at the same time as evidence of deeper changes, re-evaluating the essence of that discourse. This can be clearly seen in science communication, which has gone from being bilingual to monolingual. The practical dimension of ancient texts has been replaced in later eras by popular science communication. The knowledge of individual disciplines has been consolidated. Civilisational development should also be considered important as it has led

to the stabilisation of science and thus scientific discourse in specific cultural areas. Philosophical and cultural developments have led to re-evaluation and reinterpretation of the notion of the subject of scientific discourse, and this has given rise to a non-scientific (in the positivist sense) treatment of discourse. In the case of the discourse of the excluded, it is slightly different, with a clearly discernible discourse **dynamics**. This is because the problem persists; the discourse grows out of the need to mark one's presence in a patriarchal society, with Catholic traditions, intolerant, xenophobic, and holding with essentialist values. The modes of manifestation and the visibility of the LGBTQ+ community are only transformed; the cultural context and the pragmatic dimension of the discourse remain unchanged.

The linguistic historical entanglements of discourse research are in line with the trend, dominant in Polish reflection on the history of the natural code for many years, to set the research in the context of broadly defined cognitive methods. This legitimises and perpetuates the interdisciplinarity of the approaches and the emphasis on the affiliation of language with culture. The problems and questions contextualised in this way are linked to the textocentricity of today's linguistic reflection and the tendency to put emphasis on multimodal and semiotic aspects. Furthermore, the social factor should also be considered, perhaps not always expressed *expressis verbis* as is the case in foreign literature but present and deserving of in-depth reflection (Przyklenk 2018).

Sociocultural issues usually concern **external changes** that have always been present in the language history⁵. The presence of the discourse studies approach in historical language reflection is a prerequisite for adopting the thesis of the decisive influence of various extra-linguistic factors on communication. The media serve as a good example as one of the main elements driving the changes in the Polish language of the last century⁶. In fact, media transformations are often one of the decisive conditions for discourse transformations. Transformations in the media domain have also left their mark on the discourses of the excluded. For the LGBTQ+ discourse, in which issues of identity, exclusion, and difference from the dominating heteronormative, oppressive cultural pattern come to the fore, the possibility of communicating

⁵ cf., e.g., the classic synthesis of the history of Polish language by Zenon Klemensiewicz.

⁶ Irena Bajerowa (2003) describes the most recent era in the history of the Polish language as the media era.

freely within one's own group and manifest one's presence to other members of society should be considered essential. As research has shown (Rejter, in press a), the emergence of new media has made access to information from all over the world easy and has abolished the problem of the invisibility of the excluded. The richness and plurality of forms, the reach of the message, and thematic specialisation – these are all features of communication in the new media that favour the formation and development of new groups and communities comprising members united by a common problem, interest, goal, etc. Unlimited diversity, the global reach of information, and the means of communicating across unlimited distances have certainly changed the discursive reality. What previously had to fit into a single issue of a low-circulation magazine (often published underground using the duplicating technology at the beginning) now occupies a virtual space. It can therefore be argued that it is thanks to changes in the media that the dimension, reach and, in a way, modality of the discourse of the excluded has changed, both in the ontological and general linguistic sense.

4. Definition of discourse and historical discourse studies – research perspectives

In this paper, the assumption is that discourse studies, especially synthetic works require explicit historical context of both the research and the concept of the discourse itself. One of the most recent linguistic definitions of discourse (integrative and open, as its author declares) implicitly and very signally assumes the participation of a historical factor, but this is not explicitly stated. According to this concept, discourse is “[...] a set of habitual communicative practices, performed by different subjects in the form of serial utterances (texts), which in the process of interaction shape certain visions of the world according to accepted cultural rules” (Czachur 2020: 144). The term “habitual communicative practices” can suggest the historical entanglement of discourse, but it seems that this aspect is not sufficiently highlighted. The issue looks somewhat better in the light of the definition of discourse linguistics by the same researcher:

Discourse linguistics, as a theoretical and linguistic as well as analytical research programme, sees its cognitive goal primarily in the analysis of relations, shaped through the discourse, between language use, collective belief systems, and knowledge selection proc-

esses vs culture, asking how linguistic perspectivalisations create socially shared meanings and thus model certain images of reality (Czachur 2020: 216).

There are some signs that the historical factor in linguistic analyses of discourse has been recognised, as evidenced by some phrases, such as “shaped relations” and “knowledge selection processes,” but there is still no explicit statement of the embedding of the term “discourse” in the context of the processuality of language and communication. This is not an isolated case. In most proposals for linguistic definitions, the discourse itself is understood (implicitly!) as a phenomenon with historical aspects (dimension, message, etc.), but this is not expressed explicitly and there is no emphasis on dynamics, processuality, and transformations as aspects of the discourse that should be considered and subjected to scientific reflection⁷. This approach may be due to the fact that there is still too little work being produced by linguists in the field of historical discourse research while discourse theorists generally lack experience in this type of research. An increased interest in the transformations of discourses over time could significantly enrich the reflection and, with time, lead to the recognition of **historical discourse studies** as a subdiscipline of discourse linguistics⁸. Furthermore, the observation of historical discourse dynamics could prove to be a key issue in terms of the definition and scope of the concept.

5. Conclusions

The discussion presented in this paper leads to the following conclusions:

1. The recognition of the complementarity between discourse studies and language history confirms the mutual benefits for both subdisciplines of linguistics. In addition to the undoubted broadening of the perspectives of the language history through the adopted perspective of discourse studies, the impact of multifaceted transformations (of language, communication, culture, etc.) on the concept of discourse itself over time should be noted.

⁷ In reflections under the social sciences and certain humanities, e.g., in Michel Foucault, the classic of sociological and philosophical discourse studies, historical analyses of particular discourses are very common. cf., e.g., Foucault 1987, 2010, 2020.

⁸ In a way, the historical account of discourse studies remains in relation to the linguistics of memory, in which, however, the accents have been differently distributed and the research questions have been differently posed. cf., e.g., Czachur, ed. 2018.

2. The influence of historical processes on the discourse reinforces the thesis that its definition is open in nature. This is because the concept, especially the distribution of accents in defining its essence, i.e., profiling, depends on the particular era, sometimes even several centuries-old, the shorter period in which the discourse functions, and the factors to which it is subject.

3. The specific character of the discourse considered in a historical perspective should perhaps lead to the recognition of a subvariety of discourse linguistics. It could be called historical discourse studies, as in the case of stylistics⁹ and historical genology¹⁰.

4. Accepting the thesis of the significant role played by various historical factors in the understanding of the term “discourse” is promising as it may result in interesting research on communication as a significant component of culture, understood as a multifaceted and dynamic area subject to complex influences related to transformations over time. In this approach, both what changes and what remains stable will be important.

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⁹ This subdiscipline has a long tradition in Polish linguistics (Skubalanka 1984).

¹⁰ Maria Wojtak devotes an extensive section of her monograph on the synthesis of linguistic genology to historical genology. cf. Wojtak 2019: 161–204.

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The aim of the paper is to indicate the research potential and perspective of discourse as a historical and dynamic phenomenon. Methodology used in the paper concentrates on discourse linguistics, stylistics, and text linguistics, which is related to the concept of language as a mode of communication manifested at its higher levels.

What is important, the author is convinced that historical dimensions can be embedded into the definition of discourse. The first aspect constitutes the extension of the reflection at the discourse level in historical language studies. However, the inverse relation is most interesting. It is worth noting that the language history research could enrich the concept of discourse. Referring to previous research on the history of Polish scientific discourse and discourse of the excluded, the author

formulates a thesis on the influence of the historical research on the concept of discourse, which could manifest itself in the following ways: (1) remodelling of the definition of discourse; (2) discourse dynamics; and (3) external discourse changes (cultural, sociological).

The main conclusions are as follows: (1) The complementarity of language history and discourse linguistics should be considered. (2) Discourse definition is an open category and, among others, depends on historical changes. (3) The dynamic nature of discourse could be the basis for adopting historical discourse studies as a subdiscipline of linguistics. (4) Historical aspects of discourse can encourage research on communication as a dynamic, multifaceted, and complex component of culture.

Keywords: *discourse, language history, discourse linguistics, stylistics, history of Polish*