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WHAT IS COGNITIVE IN DISCOURSE?

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Abstract

Discourse has long been a key notion for linguistic research. The scope of this article embraces the issue of its cognitive status. The segments of our interest to the field tend to go further than cognitive characteristics of discourse. They explore the knowledge integration in discourse and specify the principles of discourse cognitive organization. With the developed method of conceptual configuration of knowledge, which can be applied to any act of processing the knowledge and its subsequent language representation, we outline the particular types of knowledge humans activate in their discursive activity in order to construe the world as plunged in socio-cultural communicative environment and perceived in close interaction between all its elements (participants, objects, events, their characteristic features, etc.). It is claimed that all types of knowledge integrate, thus, forming the discourse and ensuring its functioning. We also elaborate the principles that might be regarded as revealing the cognitive nature of discourse as a highly anthropocentric phenomenon. The idea of integration underlies all the principles. It proves a complex cognitive nature of discourse determined by its high anthropocentricity and involvement in all spheres of human life. All this contributes to the development of cognitive foundations of discourse and invites the linguistic scholarship to broader discussions.

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Keywords: Discourse, discursive knowledge, discursive construal of the world, principles of discourse cognitive organization.



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1. Introduction

A human's nature is most fully revealed in discursive activity, since the latter is closely related to the world perception and its further interpretation in an enormous number of situations a human finds him/herself in. Awareness of this fact has aroused great interest of the linguistic scholarship. They realize the complexity of discourse and the need to explain this phenomenon as the one that represents the knowledge of a human, his/her behaviour, system of values and stereotypes, dominant communicative strategies, patterns and schemes of processing the information, to name only a few.

Such multidimensional scope of discourse and an infinite number of its specific manifestations give reasonable grounds for the linguists' special interest to discourse. In our research we claim that discourse has its peculiar organization, other than that of lexical and grammatical units of language. Formed in a specific communicative situation and oriented toward a certain pragmatic goal, discourse is a process and result of its participants' complex cognitive activity. As Levinson (2006) metaphorically states, cognition is now "at the heart of human interaction" (p. 85).

Discourse is thus studied within the frame of the cognitive approach to language analysis. Due to its high explanatory potential this approach offers a wide range of possibilities in describing the cognitive nature of discourse and helps to explain and justify a cognitive basis of many aspects of discourse manifestations. By this it obviously provides cognitive grounds for many theoretical propositions regardless the area of scientific interest (linguistic or non-linguistic).

2. Problem Statement

Discourse is currently viewed as a communicative-and-cognitive phenomenon, a multidimensional space for language functioning in various forms of human activity.

In communicative and sociolinguistic studies, discourse has always been the main object of research. It is analyzed as a communicative event, manifestation of text in a particular extra-linguistic environment, a situational context of language use. According to Fairclough (1992), "any discursive 'event' (i.e. any instance of discourse) is seen as being simultaneously a piece of text, an instance of discursive practice, and an instance of social practice" (p. 4).

The cognitive approach to discourse has been introduced to study discourse in the perspective of conceptualization, its relation to human mind. Initially discourse was employed for cognitive analysis of language units, functioning in various types of discourse. Discourse was also referred to as a resource for identifying a specific character of conceptualization in forming individual meanings in its context. Thus, in most cases it was viewed as a vast conceptual space which reveals the functional potential of all language units, structures and phenomena. Currently, discourse is regarded as a cognitive-and-communicative manifestation of language functioning, a language phenomenon providing for integration of two different but closely related processes – cognition and communication.

Analyzing the heritage of cognitive linguistics to anchor its problems in search for future prospects, Dabrowska (2016) states:

In the forty years or so since its inception, cognitive linguistics has made enormous strides. We now have detailed descriptions of a variety of lexical and grammatical phenomena in many languages, including some very little studied ones; we have a better understanding of how meaning is constructed, why languages are the way they are, how they are acquired and how they change, and we have laid the theoretical foundations for understanding language processing and impairment. (p. 479)

The list might be extended with the reference to discourse as well. Within the framework of our cognitive research, we base on the following theoretical assumptions:

- Discourse is a process and result of a human's inherent cognitive need to grasp the integrity of certain fragments of the world (situations and events) that fall within a focus of his/her particular attention.
- Discourse is a hierarchically highest language phenomenon. It manifests an upper stage of human cognitive activity on comprehension of some fragment of the world (a discursive event) at a certain moment of time in a certain sociocultural environment. This cognitive activity is complex and involves closely interrelated processes of knowledge configuration, providing a specific character of conceptualization – discursive conceptualization.

As the highest level of cognitive organization of knowledge discourse is characterized by the maximum anthropocentricity, since it is a speaker / writer who bases on both collective and individual systems of knowledge and activates them for the world interpretation. Collective knowledge “encompasses the overall knowledge that is embedded in language as it is shared by a particular speech community” (Boldyrev, Dubrovskaya, & Tolmacheva, 2017, p. 210). It also provides a human with the knowledge of accepted norms of communication as well as rules of discourse formation according to a certain genre. Individual knowledge is “responsible for an individually grounded interpretation” (Ibid.). It comprises what an individual believes to be true, justified through a course of his/her life, and corresponding to his/her opinions, stereotypes, values and experience.

3. Research Questions

The issue we claim vital in modern cognitive research is that of the cognitive status of discourse.

We believe that its solution involves full theoretical coverage and development of methodology, which, in turn, will definitely make it possible (1) to specify cognitive foundations of discourse, (2) to reveal cognitive mechanisms of formatting the knowledge in discourse as a specific form of language manifestation, (3) to prove that the communicative features of discourse and its genre variability are basically cognitive, (4) to justify (theoretically and empirically) that discourse is a complex conceptual space where cognition and communication integrate.

4. Purpose of the Study

This research aims at covering a cognitive scope of discourse while revealing and accurately characterizing the types of knowledge necessary for its formation as well as at developing the key principles of discourse cognitive organization. By doing this we make an attempt to define discourse as a specific space of information processing and multi-dimensional knowledge configuration. We show that making use of and focusing on different types of knowledge, organizing them into an integral whole according to a certain algorithm is achieved by a human due to his/her cognitive need to construe a fragment of the world in a variety of relationships and interdependencies of events and their participants. That is precisely what gives us grounds to claim the cognitive nature of such a communicative phenomenon as discourse.

5. Research Methods

In order to define and prove the cognitive status of discourse it is necessary to identify the types of knowledge that are involved in its formation and constitute its cognitive basis. For this we apply the method of conceptual configuration of knowledge (Magirovskaya, 2009).

As a special research tool, the developed method provides an opportunity to analyze discourse as a system of representation of a human's complex cognitive activity. Thus, it allows to identify and analyze the features of the conceptual configuration of knowledge at the level of discourse, as well as to trace the algorithm (scenario) of all types of knowledge integration in it. This underlies the perspective within which discursive knowledge configuration specificity is assumed to be a complex integration of knowledge a human engages when plunged in a communicative situation as its conceptualizer.

This method of knowledge configuration is prompted by the anthropocentric paradigm of linguistic research and, therefore, is easily adjusted to a vast set of other interpretative methods. It justifies that by studying discourse as an integral part of cognition we can restore the way a human sees the world through the prism of language which inherently reflects a human's ability to see the world and to comprehend it in different forms and manifestations (Kubryakova, 2004).

6. Findings

Linguistically construing the world, discourse presents its special perception by a human who regards the world as not a vast material space of individuals, objects and phenomena but a system of their interdependence and interaction. It manifests a human's cognitive needs and abilities to understand the world in all its diversity, on the one hand, and integrity, on the other hand. The world grasped in discourse is never an exact copy of some fragment of reality which has fallen into a focus of a human's attention at certain time and place but a unique coherent construal of this fragment.

This distinguishes discursive interpretation from other forms of linguistic interpretation, and namely lexical and grammatical ones. Compared to them, discursive interpretation is much more complex as it involves all types of knowledge a human has gained in the course of socialization. All knowledge is integrated, thus getting a certain configuration.

6.1. Discourse as a result of integrated knowledge configuration

We claim that the integrity of discourse serves as a prerequisite for discourse formation. This integrity is achieved through processing and configuration of (1) the knowledge of the world, (2) the knowledge of the language, (3) social knowledge, (4) the knowledge of communication, and (5) the knowledge of discourse genres, to name only the main ones.

- *The knowledge of the world* forms a substantial basis for discursive activity. It constitutes a human's conceptual base, since it represents a system of all existing and constantly emerging concepts and categories. This knowledge is based on lexical conceptualization and categorization and embraces the information about all natural objects and phenomena (their colour, size, form, structure, type of movement, function, qualitative and quantitative characteristics, etc.) which is stored in mind and used when needed. While speaking about the weather, for example, a human extracts the knowledge about natural phenomena, their types, the effects they might have, the places and the season of the year they can be observed at, and the factors causing them. This knowledge, thus, reflects a human's system of concepts in the language as a particular coding system.
- *The knowledge of the language* provides an ability to capture the knowledge about the world in a set of parameters that determine the world's integrity, since they reveal some sort of relations the humans consider the most important. This type of knowledge is grammatically fixed. Being inherently linguistic, this knowledge suggests a specific language projection of the world. Through morphological categories the knowledge of the world gets its temporal, quantitative, determinative, etc. configuration. The actions, for example, are perceived as time bound, real or unreal, active or passive, etc., the objects are viewed as unique or multiple, discreet or non-discrete, etc., all these characteristics being represented by morphological categories of parts of speech (Besedina, 2015). Syntactic categories of the parts of the sentence conceptualize the events through their participants' functions, the predicate conceptualizing the event proper (the action or state), the subject pointing to its main participants or sources of the action/state, the objects describing other participants as beneficiaries, instruments, etc., and adverbial modifiers registering the manner, time, place, reason etc. peculiar for construing the event (Furs, 2014). All together these grammatical means determine the conceptual network through which the world is viewed as a whole (Boldyrev, 2009).

In the course of discursive interpretation of the world, which is always selective, a human uses only the knowledge he/she personally considers to be relevant for comprehension of a certain fragment of reality. This activated knowledge is always subject to its processing in the speaker's/writer's mind and obtaining a unique perspective of interpretation and evaluation, accordingly (Boldyrev, 2011).

- No less important in discourse is *social knowledge*. It embraces the collective knowledge of culture, all sociocultural norms and expectations, stereotypes and values of certain social groups, etc. This knowledge is also mental (Dabrowska, 2015). It adds a socially vital perspective to the interpretation of events in their socio-cultural context. Moreover, it

contributes to the formation of the general context of discourse, which is dynamic and situational. The context implies taking into account the knowledge of other participants involved in the discursive event as well as constant exchange of the knowledge available and relevant from a point of view of a subject of discourse and, as a rule, enrichment or adjustment of this knowledge to that of all the participants in the process of discursive construal of the world.

- Discourse also employs the system of a human's *communicative knowledge*. This knowledge focuses on extra-linguistic situation in which discourse is involved (the knowledge about temporal and spatial characteristics of a particular discursive event, its participants, their pragmatic goals, terms of communication, etc.). This type of knowledge is of both cognitive and communicative nature. Its cognitive aspect presupposes a human's awareness of extra-linguistic situation and good orientation in it, the knowledge of extra-linguistic situation being a part of the knowledge of the world, yet, relating to a particular moment of a human's interaction with the world. Being communicative, this knowledge implies choosing a certain type of communicative behavior while speaking/writing as well as the strategies and tactics to achieve a necessary pragmatic goal, aimed at obtaining the response which is expected from other participants in communication. As a result, another vector of knowledge configuration is introduced to the process of discursive interpretation, the one of designing the discourse according to the involved participants' pragmatic goals in specific conditions of a certain discursive event.
- *The knowledge of discourse genres* is also mandatory. According to the editors of *Genre in Language, Discourse and Cognition* volume, discourse genres are "cognitive constructs, recognized, maintained and employed by the members of a given discourse community" (Stukker, Spooren, & Steen, 2016, p. 9). It is "the discursive knowledge that underlies speech genres in the form of genre-simulators" (Langlotz, 2015, p. 515). This knowledge is necessary for initiation, construction and structuring the discourse according to its format characteristics, its main constitutive features. What makes this knowledge peculiar is that it defines a certain algorithm (model) of structuring the discourse as per the conventions regarding the beginning and end of discourse, the order of some pieces of information that should be presented in it, etc. It also serves a guideline of discourse content organization, and namely the configuration of knowledge as per the degree of content completeness, its objectivity / subjectivity, distribution of information in discourse, etc.

Totally different by their nature, all types of knowledge are closely related to each other. Their integration is a basic condition for discourse formation. Yet, such integration is possible only in discourse as a cognitive-and-communicative space. The integrated knowledge of the world, language, society, participants of a discursive event, its communicative parameters, as well as the main format characteristics of a particular discourse genre prove the cognitive status of discourse and give us grounds to define this language phenomenon as a highly interpretative construal of the world, framing the structure and content of anthropocentrically focused and organized conceptual space.

6.2. Key principles of discourse cognitive organization

By the analysis of the types of knowledge involved in discursive interpretation of the world we claim that discourse is communicative in its pragmatic purpose and functioning and cognitive in its formation. Its cognitive organization is subject to a number of principles. The set of these principles reveals the cognitive nature of discourse and its status as the highest level of language functioning and integrated knowledge configuration.

- *The principle of anthropocentric nature of discourse knowledge* is based on understanding discourse as a process and result of a human's interpretative activity. This activity is highly individual and selective. It largely depends on the system of a human's knowledge, beliefs and suppositions, opinions and evaluations, his/her personal, social and cultural features as well as communicative intentions and cognitive abilities to build up some mental and linguistic representation of a fragment of the world, a discursive event.

A human producing a discourse is a subject of discursive activity. He/she simultaneously acts as a subject of discursive knowledge and that of its organization. It is he/she whose knowledge gets a certain configuration when employed in a particular act of conceptualizing some fragment of reality. Processing of the knowledge available, its transformation and formation of new knowledge are limited to a human's understanding of a conceptualized fragment, the links and interdependencies identified between the objects of conceptualization and their characteristics, the logic of knowledge configuration.

Such a strong interpretative potential of discourse lies in its anthropocentric origin. Resulting from the act of the world perception and processing the information about one of its fragments at certain time and place, discourse manifests a number of cognitive actions. These are, for example, (1) putting a special focus of attention to a selected fragment of reality, which is of a speaker's / writer's particular interest due to his/her certain cognitive need and is subject to his/her specific pragmatic goal; (2) embedding a conceptualized fragment in one's own system of knowledge, evaluation, beliefs, values, and stereotypes; (3) adaptation of a conceptualized fragment to the system of knowledge, evaluation, beliefs, values, and stereotypes of other participants involved in the common space of discursive activity.

- A high degree of interpretation in discourse, however, cannot be regarded as boundless in terms of discourse content and structural organization. It is still limited in a certain way by the format of the discourse, the format providing the scheme of discourse formation via following the certain principles and rules. Boldyrev defines the format of knowledge as "a form or way of representing knowledge at mental or linguistic levels" (Boldyrev, 2006, p. 5). The dependence of discourse structure and content a discourse genre is stated in *the principle of formatting the knowledge as per the type of discourse*. The type of discourse, thus, serves as a specific cognitive model of knowledge configuration. For example, the knowledge about an important global event will be differently formatted in TV or Internet news, political debates, interviews, lectures, essays, etc., each of discourse type having its specific pattern of distributing the

conceptualized information, volume and degree of its objectivity, as well as language means and tools of their representation.

- *The principle of integrative processing of a large volume of varied information* is realized only in discourse due to the capacity of the latter to embrace multiple aspects of a discursive event. The discourse hosts particular meanings formed in the course of conceptualization of specific objects or phenomena mentioned in it (these are all kinds of metaphoric, allusive, hyperbolic, etc. meanings as well as contextual denotational meanings of all notional words used). These meanings are represented by lexical units and their grammatical categories. The conceptual space of discourse also covers the whole fragment of reality with its inherent complex system of relationships and interdependencies of objects, phenomena and their characteristics. The knowledge involved is organized by the text categories of information content, cohesion and coherence, integrity, completeness, etc. Due to these categories a discursive event is conceptualized as a whole, this whole regarded as a subjective model of a conceptualized fragment of the world.
- *The principle of conceptual integrity* determines the continuity of discourse. The principle implies the choice of the basic concept of discourse. It is this concept that is regarded as key conceptual knowledge against which all the other concepts are arranged, thus making it possible to structure the fragment chosen as a set of referents and their relations toward the basic one. For example, description of one's favourite book may contain some commentaries on books in general, notes on different kinds of books existing, memories of friends' favourite books, etc. but all this information is organized to support the main aim of discourse, its key concept, the concept being one's favourite book.
- *The principle of integration of different types of knowledge* focuses on the fact that discourse is formed when different types of knowledge get simultaneously activated. The nature of their integration at the level of discourse is secondary, derivative and communicative. It is in individual processing of all the knowledge available to a human in order to form specific knowledge about a fragment of the world, which seems the most significant to him/her at a particular moment of conceptualization. It should be noted here that the integration of knowledge does not mean completeness of conceptualization. The latter is always dependent on a human's system of knowledge and some other factors, all factors being determined by certain types of knowledge.

Integration of knowledge is due to a human's cognitive ability to focus on and operate with the knowledge of different nature. The main types of knowledge a human processes within his/her discursive activity include: (1) the knowledge of the world as a conceptual basis of discourse, (2) the knowledge of language as a coding system of the knowledge about the world's integrity, (3) social knowledge as a general socio-cultural context of discourse, (4) the knowledge about other participants of a discursive event that a speaker / writer takes into account in creating a common cognitive context of discourse, (5) communicative knowledge as the knowledge about extra-linguistic situation in which discourse takes place and which

determines the specifics of discourse regarding the communicants' pragmatic goals, and (6) the knowledge of discourse format characteristics, its constitutive features.

Operating these types of knowledge, their storage, transformation as well as new knowledge formation are performed by cognitive mechanisms as universal mental operations of knowledge processing. They provide all the vectors of conceptualization: (1) representation of particular concepts and profiling their certain characteristics (cognitive mechanisms of lexical and grammatical conceptualization), (2) representation of discourse fragments, and (3) formatting discourse as an integral mental and linguistic representation of a single fragment of reality. They are far from being homogenous. One group of mental operations is involved in formatting discourse as an integral fragment of conceptualized knowledge and, accordingly, in framing its structure and content. The other group represents numerous specific meanings within the discursive space and ensures their interaction. This group makes it possible to introduce specific content to discourse and, consequently, to make it unique. Yet, all mechanisms are interrelated, this giving the grounds for formulating *the principle of cognitive mechanisms integration*.

The formulated principles are suggested as basic principles that prove the cognitive status of discourse and, thus, justify regarding it as a space of language functioning which is formed in the course of different types of knowledge integration initiated by a speaker / writer in order to present a fragment of the world in a certain communicative situation in which he/she is involved.

7. Conclusion

The cognitive approach suggests a different focus of discourse analysis. It largely contributes to anthropocentric understanding of discourse, its description through the prism of a great variety of human activities. This approach and the integrative theory of discourse, which has been recently developed, favour considering discourse as a cognitively structured phenomenon of language functioning in certain communicative environment.

Initiated by a speaker's / writer's communicative need, discourse can get its language manifestation only due to human cognitive ability to focus on some fragment of the world, perceive it in its integrity and select the information which seems to be relevant. Such cognitive and linguistic interaction with the world leads to its discursive interpretation.

Having revealed the types of knowledge a human operates with and processes to discursively interpret the world, we, first of all, claim the dual cognitive nature of discourse. By this we mean that discourse is highly interpretative in the way a speaker / writer perceives and represents the knowledge basing on his/her awareness and understanding of the world (a fragment of conceptualization), creates a common cognitive context with other participants of communicative situation while taking into account all extra-linguistic factors. The content of discourse is, thus, a result of unique (individual and subjective) knowledge configuration. Yet, on the other hand, discourse is not that free in content representation, as it is always formatted according to a certain genre restrictions and, thus, has its particular structure and pattern(s) of framing the content. This is due to a speaker's / writer's taking into account the knowledge of typological characteristics of discourse.

This part of research also brings light to the notions of knowledge and discourse which are regarded primary in the humanities and social sciences but, as van Dijk (2012) notes, are still given little research focus on “the equality fundamental relationship” between them.

Secondly, we formulate the principles of discourse cognitive organization. Introducing them, we argue that it is a human (a subject of discursive activity) who “sifts” the world through his/her conceptual system and adjusts the integrative knowledge of it to a certain scheme of discursive representation which is possible due to cognitive mechanisms of knowledge configuration. This part of research might contribute to the system of current knowledge about discourse, which, in Aleksandrova’s (2017) opinion, “is being broadened every day and which, presumably, is expected to give us new results in comprehension of the language existence and performance” (p. 302).

The research will hopefully lead to further theoretical assumptions, empirical findings, and methodological shifts that might significantly expand the integrative theory of discourse and, thus, offer new insights and explanations to what discourse (and, broader, human communication) is.

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