

# **Discourse Community Analysis: Sense Construction vs Non-Sense Construction**

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Abstract:

The proposal examines the nature of the political discourse of international organizations (IMF , world Bank , the UN , European Union , African Union , The Arab League, etc.). The study originates from a fundamental paradox: how can we use the same descriptive linguistic tools which we use in analyzing the production of sense for the production of non-sense characterizing this type of discourse? The corpus analyzed is a collection of texts produced by the African Union. The high frequency of words and terms occurring in this type of production contributes in losing their meaning which is contrary to the appreciation of terms occurring in an expert discourse for information retrieval or lexical resources purposes where the high frequency of a term consolidates its belonging to a specific field of knowledge. How can this paradox be explained? The full paper will report on the results of our analysis.

## **1) Introduction**

The term discourse community links the terms 'discourse', a concept describing all forms of communication that contribute to a particular, institutionalized way of thinking; and 'community', which in this case refers to the people who use, and therefore help to create a particular discourse (note).

"Producing text within a discourse community," according to Patricia Bizzell, "cannot take place unless the writer can define his goals in terms of the community's interpretive conventions." (Bizzell, 1992). In other words, one cannot simply produce any text — it must fit the standards of the discourse community to which it is appealing. If one wants to become a member of a certain discourse community, it requires more than learning the lingo. It requires understanding concepts and expectations set up within that community.

Discourse community analysis is thus a type of discourse analysis which can be defined as analyzing written, spoken or signed language use. The objects of discourse analysis (discourse, writing, talk, conversation communicative events, etc) are variously defined in terms of coherent sequences of sentences, propositions. Contrary to much of traditional linguistics, discourse analysts not only study language use 'beyond the sentence boundary', but also prefer to analyze 'naturally occurring' language use, and not invented examples.

Discourse analysis has been taken up in a variety of social science disciplines, including linguistics, anthropology, sociology cognitive psychology, international relations and communication studies, each of which is subject to its own assumptions, dimensions of analysis, and methodologies. Topics of interest to discourse analysts include: the various levels or dimensions of discourse, including significant body language such as sounds, intonations, gestures, the discourse itself (syntax, the lexicon, style, rhetoric, meaning, strategies and other aspects of interaction and the genres of discourse (various types of

discourse in politics, the media, education, science, business, etc.); It also looks at the relations between discourse and the emergence of sentence syntax; the relations between text (discourse) and context; the relations between discourse and power; the relations between discourse and interaction; the relations between discourse and cognition and memory

The article I am suggesting originates from a fundamental paradox: how can we use the same descriptive linguistic tools which we use in analyzing the production of sense for the production of non-sense? My work deals with building linguistic resources for information systems (glossaries, terminologies, ontologies etc.). This process involves collecting, analyzing and describing the linguistic elements from corpora. Discourse analysis although uses the same description tools involves also a 'beyond the sentence boundary' analysis. The corpus analyzed is a collection of texts produced by the international organizations. The terms, understood in a terminological sense, occurring in this type of discourse lose their sense. In other words, one can understand their normal/conventional sense only outside of the context (if they are taken separately). How can this paradox be explained? Their high frequency contributes in losing their sense which is contrary to the appreciation of terms occurring in an expert discourse or in information retrieval where the high frequency of a term consolidates its belonging to a specific field of knowledge.

## **2) Discourse Analysis: Sense Construction vs Non-Sense Construction**

One of the purposes of information and communication sciences is the construction and sharing of meaning. This process involves building reference tools such as thesauri for indexing and retrieving an increasing digital data. Meaning construction through these tools is based on well known conceptual methods. To guarantee communication between the various actors of a field of knowledge, or what we can call a 'community of experts' which uses its own discourse these tools should be rigorously and coherently designed. The term holds a univocal relationship with the concept hence normalizing terminologies. Normalization is an activity characterizing many organizations (such as la Délégation de la langue Française) producing and validating such terminologies. These coherent approaches are in total contradiction with the implicit meaning construction characterizing the political discourse of international organisations, a rather stilted and 'politically correct' form of logorrhoea. A recent study<sup>1</sup> shows how this type of discourse is characterized by its non-sense. Thus the international community could be said to use an approach diametrically opposed to the one I have been using so far This paradox is particularly interesting and calls for a thorough examination of information production contexts. Meaning should normally be contextualized which is why it would be interesting to study the following aspects: who are the "producers" of the discourse. Who are the recipients/targets? What kind of impact does it have on the recipients/targets? The conceptual network centred around a scientific or technical term should help putting the term into a coherent conceptual environment which will help understanding its scope and meaning. If we look now to the international organizations discourse, also called « international rhetoric », (Rist, 2002) we find a peculiar conceptual network which strengthens the non-sense in a 'coherent' manner. ▽

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<sup>1</sup> (*Les mots du pouvoir*)

If we examine the political discourse of international organizations (IMF , world Bank , the UN , European Union , African Union , The Arab League) we notice that its largely symbolical and that its operating field is in itself symbolical. Reality is manipulated by the discourse in order to conform it to the symbolical contents that have been pre-selected. Distortions are denied because behind this symbolism contains a solid ideology all the stronger for being implicit. Since the end of communism a logico-semantic setting was born and a number of terms like (*empowerment, stakeholders, transparency, good governance, level playing field, human rights, free market, gender*) should be understood, not in their univocal original meaning but rather as symbols. In a way this harks back to the old Communist discourse in which words such as proletariat, working class, *masses progress, popular struggle* and so on had a “coded” meaning which had only a distant relation either to the political science vocabulary or even to the original Marxist vocabulary it was supposed to have been borrowed from. In analysing the corpus related to the African Union reports, a specific discourse genre, I will refer to the studies undertaken by D. Maingueneau and A. Krieg-Planque which I consider as particularly relevant..

The impact of international rhetoric on–its audience resembles the Indian Chief discourse described in Pierre Clastre (1974):

« Parler est pour le chef une obligation impérative, la tribu veut l’entendre : un chef silencieux n’est plus un chef [...]. Ce n’est pas de l’esthétique qu’il est question mais de politique. La parole du chef n’est pas dite pour être écoutée. Parce que littéralement, le chef ne dit, fort prolixement, rien. Son discours consiste, pour l’essentiel, en une célébration, maintes fois répétées, des normes de vie traditionnelles », (Clastre, 1974) .

We translated this quotation as follows :

For the Chief , speaking is an absolute imperative. The tribe wants to hear him and a silent chief is not a chief any more. This has nothing to do with aesthetics, it is essentially political. The speech issuing from the Chief’s lips is not made to be listened to. Because, if we consider his discourse in depth, the Chief, although he speaks a lot, *says literally nothing*. His discourse is essentially a frequently reiterated celebration of the norms of [the tribe’s] social life

### 3) Analyzing the African Union corpus

The corpus we will analyze should be representative of a discourse community. We chose texts produced by the African Union concerning the Darfur political and humanitarian crisis. We will look for terms and collocations and try to find out the “truly false” semantic network

In the full paper, examples will be given in this section.

### 4) Discussion

A discourse community has several aspects beyond its technical linguistic aspect. One is the reinforcement of the group’s norms, meaning that a minimum median line has to be adhered to. If a speaker strays too far from this norm his first punishment will be not to be taken seriously. If he strays too far the second and more serious punishment will lead him to be deprived from his job or at least to see his work perspectives reduced.

But an interesting point is that such « discourse communities » cannot at the same time simply fold back into an autistic reality. They have to deal with the real world which forces them to admit (even if only at the margins) forms of discursive heterodoxy in order to refresh the contents of the discourse and to keep it somewhat connected to reality. A good example of the failure to integrate practically such discursive heterodoxy is the failure of the Communist system between 1965 and 1989 to renew its discourse on the surrounding world, leading to an increased disconnection between the accepted discourse and what it was referring to.

## 5) Types of tools needed for analysing and extracting terms and collocations

In our previous researches we largely dealt with term extraction tools, their description and their evaluation. We don't think that these tools will be sufficient for analysing discourse even if they can be partially relevant, i.e. extracting nominal constructions. For discourse analysis we need more holistic tools capable of analyzing the sentences and find collocations. The phenomenon of collocation is discussed as a powerful tool in textual coherence. The different prevalent theories of collocation are introduced by different authors (L'Homme et al., 2000a; L'Homme et al., 2000b; ...). Collocations are relevant in our study since they help because they pinpoint the It is relevant for our study

## 6) Perspectives

We will focus on the relevance of some tools for analyzing and extracting the semantic networks. We will also assess the scope of the human involvement in analysing this type of discourse. We assume that, the human involvement is crucial since existing tools are still primitive in semantic and pragmatic analysis. Their use can be helpful in identifying terms and collocations and their contexts but they will be insufficient in analyzing the non-sense characterizing the discourse.

The final text will display the results of the Union African texts analysis.

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