

Discourse and Language Change: Theoretical Foundations and Mechanisms

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Abstract

This article examines the theoretical foundations of discourse and its relationship with language change, drawing on perspectives from historical linguistics, sociolinguistics, pragmatics, and critical discourse analysis. It discusses discourse as a context-dependent communicative process shaped by social interaction, institutional practices, and participants' interpretive strategies. Particular attention is given to the mechanisms through which linguistic variation develops into change, including the emergence, diffusion, and stabilization of innovations. The article considers lexical and semantic change, borrowing, metaphorization, grammaticalization, and reanalysis, while highlighting the influence of social networks, language norms, and digital communication. Illustrative examples from Azerbaijani and English demonstrate how communicative contexts contribute to the development and circulation of new meanings and expressions. The analysis emphasizes that discourse facilitates the social evaluation and dissemination of linguistic innovations, but structural constraints and historical processes must also be considered. It concludes by outlining the value of combining qualitative discourse analysis with diachronic corpus methods for future empirical research.

Keywords: *discourse; language change; sociolinguistics; linguistic variation; semantic change; grammaticalization; digital communication; discourse analysis*

1. The Formation of the Concept of Discourse and Theoretical Approaches

The term discourse is used with different meanings across scholarly traditions. Whereas structural linguistics primarily focused on the system of signs and the internal relations within that system, subsequent research shifted attention toward language users, communicative situations, and social relations. The concept of discourse makes it possible to examine the linguistic structure of a text together with the conditions under which it is produced and received. Therefore, discourse should not be equated either with an extended text alone or exclusively with spoken language.

Harris's (1952) study of discourse analysis is regarded as a significant milestone in the examination of linguistic sequences larger than the sentence. In later approaches, discourse came to encompass not only the distribution of linguistic units but also participants' social

knowledge, intentions, and strategies of interpretation. This expansion was characterized by the growing importance of pragmatic and sociolinguistic approaches investigating the contextual rules governing language use. Comprehensive introductions to the field subsequently consolidated these developments into systematic analytical methods (Gee, 2014).

Foucault (1972) considers discourse within the interrelationships among knowledge, power, and social institutions. In his approach, historical rules determine which statements are regarded as acceptable, which subjects acquire the right to speak, and how particular objects are classified. In explaining language change, this perspective highlights the importance of struggles over legitimacy in formal and informal discourses. However, Foucault's approach is not a theory that directly explains the specific phonological and morphological mechanisms of language change.

In critical discourse analysis, Fairclough (1992) examines text, discursive practice, and social practice as interconnected dimensions. From this perspective, linguistic choices both reflect social relations and may reproduce them. For example, the repeated use of particular terms in official documents and the media may accelerate their consolidation in public usage. Such influence does not necessarily mean that a new word becomes established as a norm; normalization requires acceptance, competition, and time.

van Dijk (2008) integrates the cognitive and social dimensions of discourse, emphasizing the role of knowledge models, ideological representation, and group relations in text comprehension. Readers and listeners may interpret the same linguistic form differently on the basis of their social experiences. This point is important for language change: the spread of innovations depends not only on their comprehensibility but also on whether particular groups evaluate them positively or negatively.

The essential characteristics of discourse include contextuality, purposiveness, interactivity, genre, and institutional conditioning. Context consists of participants, time, place, previous communicative history, and shared knowledge. The genre of discourse imposes constraints on the selection of linguistic units: terminological precision may prevail in scholarly articles, whereas brevity and attention-attracting strategies may be favored on social networks. Such differences contribute to the varying rates at which language is renewed across communicative settings.

2. Text, Speech, Discourse, and the Communicative Context

A text is generally considered a verbal product characterized by a degree of unity, cohesion, and semantic continuity. Discourse, however, also takes account of the processes through which a text is produced, transmitted, and received. The same sentence may acquire different communicative meanings when used in different historical circumstances, by different speakers, and for different purposes. Accordingly, discourse analysis asks not only about linguistic form but also why that form was selected. In Azerbaijani linguistics, Abdullayev (2011) likewise treats actual division, text, and discourse as interrelated categories.

Halliday and Hasan (1976) investigated textual cohesion, that is, the connectedness established by lexical and grammatical means. Although cohesion is an important aspect of meaning-making in discourse, it does not fully explain communicative relations. The choice of demonstrative pronouns, ellipsis, repetition, synonyms, and conjunctions contributes to textual unity; their frequency and functions may change in the course of historical development.

Bakhtin's (1986) approach to speech genres indicates that every utterance enters into dialogue with previous utterances and anticipates a future response. From this perspective,

discourse has an intertextual character. An expression originating in one genre may acquire a new value when transferred into another. For example, when a technical term enters everyday conversation, its meaning may broaden while its original specialized content becomes less prominent.

In analyzing context, it is useful to distinguish macro- and micro-levels. The micro-level includes specific dialogues, turn-taking, reference, and speech acts. The macro-level encompasses political institutions, education, economic conditions, language policy, and communication technologies. Language change arises through the interaction of both levels: an individual choice may not become an enduring linguistic innovation unless it spreads through a social network.

3. Historical-Linguistic Foundations of Language Change

Language change is the process through which linguistic units and patterns of usage develop differences over time. It may occur at phonetic and phonological, morphological, syntactic, lexical, semantic, and pragmatic levels. Historical linguistics investigates the direction, relative sequence, and causes of change. By identifying systematic correspondences among related languages, the comparative-historical method seeks to reconstruct earlier linguistic forms. Unlike directly attested evidence, such reconstructions remain scholarly hypotheses.

Saussure's (1959) distinction between synchrony and diachrony showed that describing a linguistic system at a particular point in time and studying its historical transformation are different research questions. Contemporary studies do not isolate these approaches completely. Variation existing at any given time may provide the potential starting point for subsequent change. Thus, synchronic variation and diachronic renewal can be explained in relation to one another.

In analyzing the empirical foundations of a theory of language change, Weinreich, Labov, and Herzog (1968) foregrounded the problems of constraints, transition, embedding, evaluation, and actuation. These problems concern the conditions under which change is possible, the manner in which one form gives way to another, the integration of change into social and linguistic structures, its evaluation by speakers, and why it occurs at a particular historical moment.

Aitchison (2013) demonstrates that it is scientifically inappropriate to regard language change simply as either “decay” or inevitable “progress.” Language change is a natural process associated with communicative needs, intergenerational transmission, and social mobility. Certain forms may become obsolete, new resources may emerge, and the functional load of existing resources may shift. Simplification in one domain may, in turn, allow new distinctions to develop in another.

Internal causes of change include articulatory economy, phonological environments, analogical formation, and the reanalysis of grammatical constructions. External factors include migration, social prestige, education, urbanization, language contact, technology, and normative institutions. These factors generally operate in interaction rather than isolation. Methodological caution is needed when attributing any particular change to a single cause.

4. Variation, Innovation, and the Social Diffusion of Change

Variation refers to the coexistence of several linguistic forms serving the same or similar communicative functions. Variants may be distributed according to social group, age,

style, region, and communicative setting. Their coexistence does not necessarily imply identical meanings; social and pragmatic connotations may differ. For this reason, theories of language change investigate not only the emergence of innovations but also who uses them and when.

Labov's (1994) sociolinguistic studies established the importance of explaining language change through observable variation. Speakers' social backgrounds and stylistic shifts can affect the distribution of linguistic forms. The apparent-time approach compares the speech of different age groups to formulate hypotheses about possible directions of change; however, age-related temporary stylistic differences must be distinguished from historical change. Style is itself a resource through which speakers construct and signal identity (Coupland, 2007; Trudgill, 2000).

An innovation is a new form or function that emerges in the speech of an individual or a small group. To become a language change, an innovation must be adopted by other speakers, repeated in different situations, and acquire a relatively stable distribution. Social networks, the intensity of communication, and the choices of influential speakers may accelerate or restrict this transition. Accordingly, the principal stages of language change may be described as emergence, diffusion, and stabilization.

Milroy's (1987) social-network approach explains that close, dense ties may, under certain conditions, preserve local linguistic norms, whereas weaker ties can facilitate the transmission of new forms between groups. This finding should not be treated as an invariable law applying to all societies. The effects of social networks may differ depending on economic, geographical, and cultural circumstances.

Discourse makes the evaluative mechanisms of change observable. For example, a new loanword may initially be used as a neutral term in a professional environment, later become a marker of fashion on social media, and eventually enter official language. Conversely, a word may face normative criticism and remain restricted to informal communication. Thus, increasing frequency and normative acceptance are not the same process and should be investigated separately.

5. Mechanisms of Lexical and Semantic Change in Discourse

The lexicon is among the linguistic levels that respond most rapidly to social developments. New products, institutions, and experiences increase the need for naming. Word formation, borrowing, abbreviation, and the assignment of new meanings to existing words are principal responses to this need. The subject matter of discourse is an important factor in determining which innovations spread more quickly: words associated with information technologies may first expand in technical and digital discourse and then in general communication.

Semantic change involves such mechanisms as broadening, narrowing, metaphorization, metonymic transfer, and shifts in evaluative connotation. For instance, the use of the English word *cloud* to denote remote computing resources, alongside its meteorological meaning, exemplifies metaphorical naming that becomes specialized through discourse. As this use enters everyday language, the new sense of the same word becomes familiar to different audiences. Cross-linguistic regularities in such developments have been documented in detail (Traugott & Dasher, 2002).

The increased use of such expressions as *platforma*, *profil*, and *paylaşım* in contemporary Azerbaijani digital environments illustrates the influence of technology and

communication on vocabulary. The extension of *platforma* from meanings associated with a physical support or platform to a virtual service environment can be understood as semantic broadening. Determining precisely when this development occurred and at what frequency requires a dated text corpus. Analyses of religious metaphors in media and literary discourse further illustrate how metaphorical meanings circulate across genres and registers (Orucova, 2024a, 2024b).

The use of loanwords in discourse does more than expand a language's vocabulary; at times it also signals social belonging and professional identity. Competition between a native equivalent and an international term for the same concept may have different outcomes in different communicative domains. Terminological stability may become the stronger selection criterion in academic discourse, the effect of novelty in advertising discourse, and normative clarity in administrative discourse.

To track semantic change, the collocational possibilities, typical contexts, and speakers' attitudes associated with a word in different periods should be compared. A single example does not prove that a word's general meaning has changed. Observations from different genres, dates, and social groups must be brought together. This methodological requirement strengthens the connection between discourse analysis and corpus linguistics.

6. Grammaticalization and the Reanalysis of Constructions

Grammaticalization can be understood as the process through which lexical units or relatively free constructions acquire grammatical functions over time, while existing grammatical devices develop into more tightly integrated forms with more specialized functions. Hopper and Traugott (2003) interpret grammaticalization as a historical process emerging from language use. Context and frequency play a major role in this approach; frequently used expressions may come to be understood as new functional units in certain situations. Usage-based accounts connect the frequency of expressions in discourse to the emergence of grammatical structure (Bybee, 2010).

Reanalysis involves a speaker assigning an existing sequence a different structure or interpretation from the one it previously had. Its grammatical status may change even without any alteration in surface form. The new analysis may subsequently spread to other constructions and generate more visible changes. From a discourse perspective, the important point is that reanalysis becomes possible through the recurrence of particular communicative contexts.

The development of the English *going to* construction from a meaning associated with movement and direction to uses expressing future intention and prediction is a widely recognized example of grammaticalization. This process did not occur instantaneously or uniformly in all uses: spatial movement and future-oriented interpretations could coexist in particular contexts. As the new function became established, the construction's range of use expanded.

Repetition, predictability, and pragmatic inference in discourse are useful concepts for explaining grammaticalization. Information compression, preference for familiar constructions, and the inference of meaning from context may contribute over time to the stabilization of a form's function. Nevertheless, not every frequently occurring combination becomes a grammatical unit. Syntactic constraints and semantic properties must be examined separately to determine the extent of change.

7. Social Institutions, Ideology, and Linguistic Norms

Discourse also occupies an important place in the functioning of social institutions. Education, public administration, the media, law, and science establish particular genre conventions and terminological choices. These choices may subsequently become influential models in broader communication. However, official recognition of a standard language does not always coincide with speakers' everyday linguistic practices. To assess the effects of language policy, both normative documents and evidence of actual usage must be considered.

Critical discourse analysis investigates the social power relations through which particular linguistic variants gain dominance (Fairclough, 1992; van Dijk, 2008; Wodak & Meyer, 2016). Some expressions may be presented as signs of prestige and modernity, whereas others may be regarded as outdated or informal. In these processes, social evaluation may sometimes exert a stronger influence than the internal structural advantages of a linguistic form. Yet the existence of ideological attitudes does not establish that all linguistic innovations are deliberately controlled.

Standardization can be described through the interconnected stages of selection, codification, implementation, and acceptance. Orthographic and writing conventions spread widely through educational and publishing practices. In spoken communication, however, regional and social variation may continue for a long time. In this respect, standardization does not eliminate all linguistic variation; rather, it establishes shared conventions for particular communicative domains.

The designations used in institutional discourse can influence social attitudes toward particular events. Describing the same process as “renewal,” “reform,” or “change” may produce different evaluative meanings. These expressions may first become established in a specific political or organizational discourse and later enter public communication. Consequently, the study of naming strategies sheds light on the relationship between semantic change and ideology.

The distinctive features of digital discourse are rapid dissemination, the convergence of genres, multimodality, extensive user participation, and the ease with which texts can be reshared. Messaging applications, forums, and social platforms introduce some features of spoken interaction into written communication. Abbreviations, emojis, hashtags, and visual signs may contribute to the construction of meaning. These innovations should be understood not as the complete disappearance of traditional written language but as the emergence of new functional styles.

Crystal (2006) identifies internet language as a distinct subject of investigation and shows that electronic communication gives rise to diverse linguistic styles. On social networks, participants' language choices serve not only to convey content but also to adapt to an audience and present themselves. The same user may employ different styles on different platforms; therefore, forms observed on one platform should not automatically be portrayed as changes affecting the entire language.

The coexistence of English-derived lexical units and their local equivalents in digital environments may be considered a consequence of multilingual language contact. For example, the choice of expressions such as *post*, *şərh*, *link*, and *paylaşmaq* may vary with topic, age, occupation, and communicative purpose. Determining which form is more widespread requires data balanced by date, genre, and speaker group.

Internet discourse is not only a new source of linguistic innovation but also facilitates its observation. Time-stamped digital archives make it possible to trace the earliest attestations of a new expression, its trajectory of diffusion, and its use across different contexts. However,

data privacy requirements, automated accounts, repeated reposts, and platform algorithms must be taken into account when interpreting the results.

8. Research Methodology and Directions for Future Empirical Studies

To investigate discourse and language change empirically, it is first necessary to define a clear research question, time span, and selection of materials. For example, to address the question “How has the use of technology-related loanwords changed in digital discourse?”, one might compare news texts, platform posts, and official documents covering specified years. The size of the dataset, the genres involved, and the sampling principles should be stated in advance.

Corpus analysis makes it possible to investigate the frequency of words and constructions, their typical collocations, and their changes over time. In addition to raw frequencies, normalized measures should be used when comparing subcorpora of different sizes. A difference in frequency between two periods does not automatically demonstrate a causal relationship: confounding variables, such as topic distribution, the composition of authors, and platform-specific features, must be considered.

Qualitative discourse analysis is necessary for interpreting quantitative findings. It examines the purpose for which a word is used, the standpoint from which it is employed, its intended audience, how intertextual references are constructed, and how an innovation is evaluated. Thus, a corpus approach addresses the questions “how much?” and “when?”, whereas discourse analysis addresses “in what context?” and “with what social meaning?”

Methodological reliability requires an operational definition of the variable, systematic coding of examples, and discussion of possible alternative explanations. In automated text processing, homonymy, polysemy, and repeated quotations may distort the results. In studies involving private correspondence, participant consent and the anonymization of data are fundamental ethical requirements. Consideration of these issues is essential not only for describing language change but also for explaining its mechanisms rigorously.

9. Conclusion

The theoretical analysis undertaken demonstrates that discourse is a communicative form of language operating within specific sociohistorical circumstances and shaped by participants' goals and strategies of meaning-making. Studying discourse enables the grammatical organization of texts to be explained in conjunction with the conditions of their production, circulation, and reception. The relationship between discourse and language change is therefore not accidental but one of mutual interaction arising from actual language use.

Language change is a multifactorial historical process manifested at phonetic, phonological, lexical, semantic, grammatical, and pragmatic levels. It is inappropriate to regard change merely as a weakening or an inevitable improvement of language. Although the language system possesses internal regularities, it is also renewed through the choices of communicators and the influence of social relations, language contact, and normative institutions.

There is a continuous relationship between variation and change. The coexistence of different variants creates conditions for a potential innovation to enter social circulation. However, not all variation develops into stable change. Frequency of use, communicative

utility, prestige, stylistic appropriateness, and the structure of social networks play important roles in the diffusion of innovation.

Lexical-semantic renewal most visibly demonstrates the influence of discourse on language. Technological, academic, political, and media discourses employ borrowing, word formation, metaphorization, and semantic broadening to name new concepts. The incorporation of a new expression into formal or everyday language depends on its acceptance among different groups.

Grammatical change, particularly grammaticalization and reanalysis, shows that meanings arising in individual communicative acts can, through long-term repetition and stabilization, develop into structural features. Nevertheless, grammatical mechanisms must be examined with reference not only to discursive conditions but also to the syntactic and semantic constraints of language.

Digital discourse allows linguistic innovations to become visible and spread rapidly, but an expression widely used on one platform does not necessarily reflect the norms of an entire speech community. For this reason, research on internet material must pay particular attention to social and genre balance, chronological sequence, and ethical requirements.

In conclusion, the examination of the theoretical foundations of discourse and language change demonstrates that historical linguistics, sociolinguistics, pragmatics, corpus linguistics, and critical discourse analysis offer complementary methodological perspectives. Future comparative and statistical studies of specific innovations using dated Azerbaijani and English language materials could help test these theoretical propositions empirically.

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