Discourse and creativity

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Chapter 1

Discourse and Creativity

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This collection presents a range of different perspectives on the relationship between *discourse* and *creativity*. It is divided into four sections, each focusing on a different type of discourse: The first section explores literary discourse, the second focuses on creativity in corporate and professional discourse, the third on creativity in multimodal discourse of various kinds, including advertising graphics, fine arts and music, with the final section addressing the impact of new technologies on creative texts and practices. In bringing together studies of creativity in such a wide variety of genres, media and modes from poetry to amateur skateboarding videos, and from such a variety of perspectives in discourse studies, from more traditional literary stylistics to newer approaches like multimodal and mediated discourse analysis, this volume aims to explore the different kinds of contributions discourse analysis can make to our understanding of creative products, the social and psychological processes that go into making them, and the ways they help to shape the identities, relationships and institutions that make up our societies.

What is Creativity?

In the last two decades, the notion of 'creativity' has found its way into nearly every facet of human life, from education to management. A hundred years ago, creativity was seen primarily as the province of artists (poets, painters, composers) and of God. Nowadays, everyone is expected to be creative. A cursory search of the British National Corpus of written and spoke English finds 'creative' collocating with such diverse words as accounting, bankruptcy, competition, governance, management, manufacturing, privatization, recreation and relationships. The last fifty years has seen a proliferation of popular books, courses, and position papers from governments and other institutions on how to make people, businesses, organizations and societies more creative.

This 'democratization of creativity' (Maybin and Swann, 2007) is also reflected in academic research in a range of disciplines such as psychology, sociology, anthropology, and linguistics, which has turned its attention to the everyday creative, practices of ordinary people. In such studies, creativity is, in the words of Ron Carter (2004:13), seen 'not a capacity of special people but a special capacity of all people."

Of course, not all creativity is 'created equal'. There is a qualitative difference between writing a symphony and creatively altering a recipe when one has run out of sugar. To capture this difference, Boden (2004) famously distinguished between *historical creativity* and *psychological creativity*, or, as others have called them, 'big C Creativity' and 'small c

creativity'. 'Big C Creativity' refers to the creativity of world changing

works of art or scientific discoveries that alter the way people think about a

certain problem or domain, whereas 'small c creativity' refers the creativity

evident in everyday problem solving, joking and verbal play: avoiding a

traffic jam or coming up with a good pick up line at a bar. Whereas 'big C

Creativity' is seen as a sign of genius, 'small c creativity' is seen as a sign a

mental health, a necessary competence for getting along in the world.

The problem with these definitions is that there is a lot in-between the

works of Shakespeare and a well-delivered apology to one's in-laws. Many

(indeed most) efforts in art and literature that aspire to the greatness of 'big

C creativity' sadly miss the mark, and many everyday acts of creativity end

up, sometimes unintentionally, having a major impact on the way people

think and interact with one another, even if it is often in a rather limited

social circle. Most of what is presented as creativity in the following

chapters occupies this middle ground. There is poetry (not all of it 'great')

and music and painting, but there is also advertising, corporate and public

relations writing, and the creative practices of young people using digital

technologies.

This problem around what counts as 'creative' and what does not exposes

an even more fundamental confusion in the way we talk about creativity.

When we use the word 'creativity', are we talking about a property of a

particular creative product -- a text or an object of art or the expression of a

scientific theory -- or are we describing a kind of *process*, what an

individual or group of people do to come up with a creative product or inventive solution to a problem? This is to say, does creativity reside in texts (and other social artifacts) or does it reside in people?

Most studies in the humanities, in literary and art criticism, have taken an almost exclusively *product* based approach to creativity. While some have sought to contextualize creative works in their social or historical contexts or to glean from them evidence of the workings of the artist's mind, the starting point has nearly always been the text.

In the social sciences, on the other hand, particularly in psychology, scholars have been more interested in the creative process. Psychological studies of scientific creativity (see for example Simonton, 1988; Grubner and Davis, 1988) and artistic creativity (see for example Getzels and Csikszentmihalyi, 1976) have focused on mental processes and cognitive models. Some like Csikszentmihalyi and Sawyer (1995) and Runco (1990) have offered theories of the 'stages' of the creative process as it occurs in an individual's consciousness. Others have taken a more socio-cultural or interpersonal approach to creative processes, seeing them as not just taking place in the minds of the individuals but also in the interaction between individuals and their social and cultural environments. Here we could include Harriington's (1990) ecological approach, the interactionist model of Woodman and Schoenfeldt (1990), and the systems approach of Csikszentmihalyi (1990).

Thus far, however, there has not been a clearly articulated perspective which integrates approaches which focus on the creative properties of products (by which we mean primarily 'texts', whether they be verbal, visual or expressed in some other semiotic mode) and the processes through which they come into being. Not only have product based approaches not adequately addressed issues of production and consumption, but process based approaches – which have typically proceeded by examining the practices of 'creative individuals' such as renowned artists and scientists – have been less effective in clearly identifying the concrete features in these individuals' achievements which make them creative. Even within the process approach, there remains a gap between those who take a more cognitive or intrapsychic perspective and those who take a more socio-cultural or interpersonal perspective (John-Steiner 1992).

It is the premise of this volume that discourse analysis, particularly as it has developed in past thirty years through contact with other disciplines like cultural studies, cognitive psychology, sociology and anthropology, can make a significant contribution to bridging these gaps. Nearly all of the chapters in this book deal explicitly with the creative processes that go into the production and interpretation of discourse, sometimes focusing more on cognitive processes, as in the chapters by Stockwell and Forceville, and sometimes more on social processes, as in the chapters by Swann and Jones. At the same time, all of them enter this exploration of process through the analysis of creative products – discourse – and it is in the concrete features of discourse that evidence for these social and cognitive processes is found.

Moreover, while some of the scholars included here emphasize the psychological aspects of these processes and some the social aspects, discourse itself serves as a link between the two, the site at which is played out the eternal tension between what the individual wishes to think or do or express and what his or her society or culture deems appropriate or meaningful or 'creative'.

'Language and Creativity' vs. 'Discourse and Creativity'

There has been considerable interest over the years in various sub-fields of linguistics in the notion of creativity. It might, in fact, be argued that creativity is at the very core of language itself, the 'essential property' of which is, according to Chomsky (1965: 6) 'that it provides the means for expressing indefinitely many thoughts and for reacting appropriately in an indefinite range of new situations.'

In the areas of applied linguistics and sociolinguistics, interest in creativity has led scholars in two distinct directions, some focusing on the application of linguistic principles to the analysis of texts that are *a priori* deemed 'creative' such as literary works and advertising slogans, and others focusing more on the creative and playful features of everyday language.

Scholars who take as their objects of study of literature include literary stylisticians such as Fowler (1996), Leech and Short (1981), Widdowson (1975) and Toolan (1998) who apply the tools of linguistics to the analysis

of literary language. While some working in this tradition have endeavored to focus on aspects of language use normally associated with 'discourse' such as pragmatics (Black, 2006), speech acts (Pratt, 1977), interpersonal politeness (Magnusson, 1999), conversational structures (Norrick, 2000), and schema (Cook, 1994), most work in this area is primarily *product based*, defining creativity as a function of 'patterns of formal features' and 'linguistic idiosyncrasies of particular texts' (Cook, 1998: 205) rather than as a function of the processes that go into making those texts or how those texts are used to take actions in broader socio-cultural contexts.

Approaches which focus less on traditional 'creative texts' and more on the creativity of everyday language are perhaps best represented by the work of Ron Carter who, in his 2004 book *Language and Creativity: The Art of Everyday Talk* and elsewhere (Carter , 1999; Carter and McCarthy, 2004) argues that features associated with literary texts like word play, rhyme, metaphor, simile, hyperbole, understatement, irony, repetition and parallelism are actually common features in the everyday spoken English of ordinary people. The hard and fast distinction between literary and non-literary language is, he contends, artificial and unhelpful; literariness is more usefully seen as a 'cline' from, to use the terminology discussed above, the 'small c creativity' of commonplace talk to the 'big C Creativity' of the literary canon. Other researchers working in the same vein include Cook (2000), Crystal (1998) and Maybin and Swann (2006, 2007).

Like literary stylistics, linguistic approaches to everyday creativity have also

made use of principles from discourse analysis. Carter, for example, addresses not just the literary features of everyday talk but also the communicative functions of these features in different kinds of social contexts and in different forms of social interaction. On the whole, however, most work in this tradition is also primarily *product* oriented, concerning itself almost exclusively with 'poetic language', in the sense that Jakobson (1960: 356) meant the term as a 'focus on the message for its own sake' rather than on the role of the message in broader social processes. Even when they take socio-pragmatic aspects of language use into account, researchers in this paradigm tend to focus on the social functions of *creative language* (by which they usually mean 'literary-like' language) rather than the function of language (of all kinds) in performing *creative acts*.

How, then, does the 'discourse and creativity' approach represented in this book differ from the approaches described above? To answer this question it is necessary first to understand what we mean by discourse. While all of the authors in this book might answer that question slightly differently, most definitions of discourse in the context of applied linguistics and sociolinguistics draw on three broad conceptualizations of language: language beyond the level of the sentence or clause; language in use; and language as part of a broader range of social practices associated with power and the social construction of knowledge. It is important to stress that these three conceptualizations of language are not so much separate and mutually exclusive 'definitions of discourse' as they are different aspects of the same phenomenon, none of which can be properly understood without reference

to the others. Nearly all contemporary approaches to discourse take all three of these aspects into account, though they might focus more on one or another of them.

The first conceptualization -- language beyond the sentence -- can be traced back to the linguist Zellig Harris (1952), who in the early fifties used the term 'discourse' to describe the next level in an analytical hierarchy of morphemes, clauses and sentences. What Harris proposed was a method of analyzing language beyond the sentence by attending to the distribution and combination of various linguistic features throughout longer stretches of text. This approach, however, is not just an extension of the Russian formalists' search for intra-textual regularities. Even in Harris's early formulation, patterns of linguistic features beyond the clause need to be further related to patterns of behavior beyond the text itself. In his seminal 1952 paper he proposes 'discourse analysis' as a means of addressing two inter-related problems, the first arising from the fact that most models of descriptive linguistics stop at the level of the sentence, and the second arising from the need to correlate 'culture' and language, that is, to understand the connection between linguistic and non-linguistic behavior.

The implication of a view of discourse as 'language beyond the sentence' for a 'discourse and creativity' approach is that in such an approach creativity is never seen as a matter of isolated instances of 'poetic' language, but rather as a matter of how all the features of a text, poetic or not, work together to form an effective whole, and further, how this whole interacts

with the social context in which it is situated. In other words, a pun, a metaphor, or an instance of rhyme or parallelism are not considered creative in themselves but rather are seen as creative insofar as they fit into larger patterns of structure and meaning.

This search for patterns in texts is, of course, not unique to discourse analysis. It is also central to literary stylistics in the more traditional sense. This practice of pattern seeking, of relating smaller parts to larger wholes, however, is the necessary starting point for a 'discourse and creativity' approach and for all of the chapters in this volume. It is fitting, then, that the book begins with Michael Toolan's treatment of repetition in poetry, a treatment that illustrates the attention to patterning so central to the conceptualization of discourse we are developing it in this book while at the same time paying tribute to traditional stylistics.

Implicit in this analytical stance towards creativity is also the notion that underpinning the creative process itself is the ability to recognize and exploit patterns in our experience of the world and in the semiotic systems within which we work. Bohm (1998), for example, in his treatment of scientific creativity, defines the creative process as one of perceiving new orders of relationships in old structures and of linking previous unrelated ideas, concepts or elements into new patterns. From this perspective, the relationship of patterning to creativity is double edged. On the one hand creativity involves understanding and being able to exploit old patterns, structures and rules, and on the other hand it involves breaking out of old

patterns and coming up with new ones. As Thurlow reminds us in his chapter, 'creative practice always emerges out of the dialectical tension between fixity and mobility, constraint and freedom, convention and innovation, stricture and defiance, orthodoxy and heterodoxy, and, in the case of language, between "grammar" and "poetry".'

The second conceptualization of language, that of 'language in use,' is most commonly associated with approaches to discourse which examine, as Austin (1962) famously put it, how we 'do things with words.' Approaches like, pragmatics, conversation analysis, interactional sociolinguistics, and Austin's speech act theory all see discourse itself as a kind of social action and explore how people use it to both *make sense of* and to *alter* the circumstances of their social and material worlds. More recent approaches to discourse such as mediated discourse analysis (Jones and Jones et al., this volume, Morrison et al., this volume, Norris and Jones 2005), and multimodal interaction analysis (see Norris 2004 and this volume) influenced by the work of Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1978), have gone even further in privileging social action as the unit of analysis, considering language as only one of a host of possible 'meditational means' which people use to take action in the world.

The implications of this view of discourse for a 'discourse and creativity' approach is that creativity is seen as residing not just in language itself but in the actions people take with language. There may, therefore, be nothing intrinsically 'creative' or 'poetic' about a piece of language. What may be

'creative', rather, may have more to do with the strategic way it is used to solve a problem, alter a situation or realign a set of social relationships. This view of discourse, in other words, takes us beyond the analysis of creative *products* to the analysis of the creative *processes* associated with them. These processes include not just the creative ways discourse is deployed to take situated social action, but also the processes through which creative texts are produced and interpreted, processes that often involve complex chains of social actions negotiated among diverse sets of social actors (see Jones et al. this volume) using a range of different meditational means (see Morrison et. al, this volume).

Fairclough (1992) refers to these complex chains of action as 'discourse processes', which he defines as the sociocognitive processes by which the producers of texts draw upon and transform past conventions and prior texts to create new meanings, and the consumers of texts appropriate and adapt these meanings based on their past understandings and experiences and their present circumstances. And so again, the tension between the old and the new, the borrowed and the original, the conventional and the subversive arises at the center of a discourse analytical approach to creativity.

All of the chapters in this book address in some way 'discourse processes' or, as Norris and Jones have called them, 'discourse in action' (Norris and Jones 2005). Some, like that by Jones and his colleagues and by Norris focus on the social processes that lead to the production of creative texts and the social construction of 'creative individuals'. Others, like those of

Stockwell and Swann, focus more on processes that go into the interpretation of creative works, Stockwell from a more cognitive perspective and Swann from a more social one. Some, like those of Bhatia and Gillen deal more with the strategic, socio-pragmatic aspects of discursive action in the context of professional communication and computer mediated communication respectively. Finally, some, like those by van Leeuwen, Morrison and his colleagues and Jones invite us to consider the impact of the semiotic resources and technological tools for communication we have at our disposal on our ability to take certain kinds of social actions and engage in certain kinds of social practices.

The third conceptualization of language in a discourse analytical approach to creativity sees it as part of broader socially informed systems of knowing, being and acting. This conception comes less from linguistics and more from cultural studies and critical sociology, though it has come to occupy an important place in linguistically based methods of discourse analysis. Gee, uses the term 'capital D' discourse' to refer to this conceptualization of language. He defines 'Discourses' as 'ways of being in the world, or forms of life which integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, and social identities' (1996:127). Foucault (1972), and after him, Fairclough (1992) use the term 'orders of discourse' in much the same way, talking about, for example, the 'discourse of medicine' and 'the discourse of law'.

On the one hand, 'Discourses' or 'orders of discourse' impose constraints on creativity, exerting control over what we can say, what we can think, and

the kinds of power relationships that play out in societies. At the same time, 'Discourses' are not fixed. They are vulnerable to being compromised, undermined or transformed as they interact with other 'Discourses'. As Candlin and Maley (1997: 204) note, 'Discourses' consist of 'internally heterogeneous discursive practices whose boundaries are in flux,' so as they come into contact with other 'Discourses', 'not only are novel (inter)texts constructed, but novel (inter)discourses arise.'

These transformations occur not only though great works of art or paradigm changing scientific discoveries, but also through the incremental everyday actions of individuals as they strategically appropriate and combine elements of different 'Discourses' in order to meet the needs of particular moments. Fairclough (1992:97) argues that 'as producers and interpreters combine discursive conventions, codes and elements in new ways in innovatory discursive events they are cumulatively producing structural changes in the orders of discourse.' When discourse is used creatively, it can potentially change 'orders of discourse' on two levels: first on the level of the immediate interaction by shifting the relationships of power among participants, creativity reframing the activity that is taking place, or otherwise creating possibilities for social action that did not exist at the outset of the interaction, and second, on the level of society or culture by contesting conventional ways of seeing things and opening up possibilities for the imagining of new kinds of social identities and new kinds of social practices (Jones 2010). Thurlow (this volume) captures the spirit of these small and subversive, though nonetheless profound acts of creativity in his

invocation of Michel de Certeau, who wrote:

> Every culture proliferates along its margins. Irruptions take place that are called 'creations' in relation to stagnancies. Bubbling out of swamps and bogs, a thousand flashes at once scintillate and are extinguished all over the surface of a society. ... Daily life is scattered with marvels, a froth on the long rhythms of language and history that is as dazzling as that of writers and artists. (1997: 139–142)

It is chiefly this conceptualization of discourse that helps a 'discourse and creativity' approach make the connection between 'small c creativity', those tiny everyday creative actions we take with 'small d discourse', and 'big C Creativity', the 'world-changing' aspect of creativity through which new 'big D Discourses' are formed and transformed.

All of the chapters in this volume engage to some extent with this dimension of discourse, considering how texts and the social actions associated with them fit into and interact with broader social formations and systems of value. Stockwell, for example, discusses how creative texts press readers into taking ethical stances and how reading itself becomes a kind of moral act. Similarly, both Stockwell and Swann consider, each from their different perspectives, how engaging with creative texts is not just a matter of resolving meaning but an experience of 'world-building'. One could hardly find a better example of how 'Discourses' are mixed to form creative new '(inter)discourses' than Bhatia's work, reported here and elsewhere

(Bhatia, 2008) on the strategic mixing of the discourses of law, accounting, finance and public relations in corporate disclosure reports. Thurlow, in his chapter, provides and excellent illustration of discursive contestation in his description of how the authentic, vernacular creativities of young people using computers are resemiotized by the mainstream media and commercial and educational institutions as 'exotic and outrageous, foolish and pointless, offensive and menacing.' Finally, both Norris and Jones concern themselves with how creative products like paintings and skateboarding videos function as cultural tools for the formation of individual and group identities spanning timescales from the discrete moment by moment actions of everyday life to the longer timescales of 'artistic careers.'

In a sense, it is this engagement with broader issues of social and institutional practices and power, what Thrlow (this volume) calls the 'cultural politics' of creativity, that most distinguishes a discourse approach to creativity from more language-based approaches. It is an approach which, as Van Leeuwen (this volume) points out, must be both descriptive and sociological, must endeavor to explain not just 'how people produce and use semiotic resources, but…also… how these uses come about, how they are taught or otherwise acquired, regulated, debated, (and) changed,' and how 'new semiotic resources and practices and new uses of existing semiotic resources are invented.'

Discourse Analysis as Creativity

The contributors to this volume not only illuminate the relationship between

discourse and creativity in a wide range of diverse domains from literary reading to jazz improvisation, they also demonstrate the creativity of discourse analysis itself as it has developed over the past half century and continues to develop. In recent years the field of discourse studies has significantly broadened its scope by forging interdisciplinary bridges with sociology, cultural studies, social practice theory, visual communication studies, media studies and cognitive psychology. Consequently, it has taken on board new concerns and priorities, many of which are represented in this volume.

Discourse analysis has, for example, become increasingly interested not just in how texts are put together but also in how people interpret and use discourse in situated social interactions, a theme taken up by nearly all of the authors represented here. It has also become more interested in issues of identity construction, issues which are featured in the chapters by Norris and Jones. It has to some degree also participated in the recent 'cognitive turn' in the social sciences (Stockwell, this volume), evidenced in the chapters by Stockwell and Forceville. It has, in addition, increasingly come to acknowledge the importance of modes other than language in the production of meaning, illustrated by the chapters by Forceville, Norris and van Leeuwen. Finally, it has started to explore what happens to meanings, social practices and social identities when they are mediated through digital technologies, an issue addressed by Thrulow, Gillen, Morrison and his colleagues and Jones.

In fact, for most of the scholars represented in this volume, discourse analysis as they practice it is itself an example of a creative (inter)discourse, an inventive blending of theories and insights from multiple fields of human inquiry. These new, hybrid approaches to discourse often demand the development of innovative new ways of working which involve mixing text analysis with more ethnographic engagement with people as they go about undertaking their everyday acts of creativity.

What this volume shows is not just that discourse analysis has something valuable to add to our understanding of creative practices and creative processes, but that the study of discourse, indeed the study of language itself is, as Chomsky noted nearly fifty years ago, ultimately and fundamentally the study of creativity. As Van Leeuwen points out in his contribution to this volume: 'the semiotician and the artist travel along parallel paths and they might as well talk and work together.'

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19

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