

Political Discourse Analysis between Ambiguities and Clarity

Salim Fathy Meridji
University of Ouargla
Algeria/ Algérie..

Abstract: This paper intends, first, to expose the two ambiguities related to both the term ‘political discourse’ and the notion ‘political discourse analysis.’ The two ambiguities are clearly explained. Later, the concern of the paper will be with the two confusions existing in both Shapiro’s (1981) and Graber’s (1981) definitions of political discourse. At the end, the very appropriate definition of political discourse is provided. Actually, defining political discourse on the basis of contextual features blocks the rise of ambiguities and confusions.

Key words: political discourse, political discourses analysis, ambiguity, confusion, critical linguistics, context, institution, political genres.

. Introduction:

Both the term ‘political discourse’ and the notion ‘political discourse analysis’ are ambiguous. The possible interpretations of the two terms are explicitly referred to. Next,. The interest of the paper shifts to two confusions which are due to Shapiro’s (1981) and Graber’s (1981) definitions of political discourse. Actually, both definitions lead to the rise of confusions. This is demonstrated by the works of Diamond (1996) and Liebes and Ribak (1991).

Given these ambiguities and confusions, the right definition of political discourse must be sought. At first, it is shown that political discourse includes other participants, and many other discourses do. Limiting the scope of political discourse to its context is advantageous. It helps excluding other discourses which are at the boundary of politics. Political discourse is a class of genres, and not only one single genre.

1. Ambiguities and confusions:

The term political discourse conveys two possible meanings (cf. Wilson. 2001:389). Therefore, it is ambiguous. Concerning the first interpretation, the term means that the discourse is itself political. The structure ‘political discourse’ is the output of three ordered transformational rules (see Meridji, 1999: chapt. 02).

At first, the relative clause transformational rule is applied (cf. Huddleston, 1976; 102). This results in the next restrictive relative clause: 'a discourse which is political.' Second, the segment 'which-tns-be' is deleted by the relative pronoun deletion rule (see Baker, 1978: 315). The remaining structure is the following: 'a discourse political.' Third, the post-modifier 'political' is moved by the noun modifier shift rule to a pre-modifying position, and is eventually inserted between the indefinite article 'a' and the noun 'discourse' (see Baker, 1978: 317). The occurrence of an adjective in such a position shows '**...a permanent or characteristic feature**' (cf. Quirk et al, 1972). This indicates that the discourse is having the characteristic feature of being political.

The second meaning expressed by the term 'political discourse' can be seen in the idea that political discourse is analysed as a discourse type. This indicates that the investigator's attention is centred on the discourse itself, and reference is neither made to political context nor to political content. At this level, it is worth mentioning that a political discourse could be studied from different points of view: pragmatically, syntactically, semantically, lexically, or sociolinguistically (cf. Gastil, 1992; Baylon, 1991).

A second ambiguity related to the notion 'political discourse analysis' is identified by Van Dijk (1998: 11). Actually, the notion means two things. At first, it tells that the analysis is concerned with a political discourse¹. Second, it means that a given discourse is politically analysed, i.e., a political approach is followed in the analysis of a discourse. This interpretation is emphasized by critical discourse analysts. Here, reference to Wodak's (1996: 204) words, which are next, could clarify the point:

In other words, critical discourse analysis aims to investigate critically social inequality as it is expressed, signalled, constituted, legitimized etc, by language use (or in discourse).²

A confusion regarding the field of political discourse may also be noted in Shapiro's (1981) opinion. According to him, all discourses could be political. This very confusing situation has arisen because the 'political' is defined on the basis of the following concepts: power, control, conflict, or

¹ To understand the nature of a political discourse, see section 2.

² See also Fairclough (1995).

domination (cf. Fairclough, 1992; Van Dijk, 1993; Chilton and Schaffner, 1997).

As an illustrative case, reference may be made to Diamond's (1996) study. Although her work is concerned with the discourse of staff meetings, she herself considers it 'political' this situation is mainly due to the fact that issues, such as: power and control are being employed.

Another confusion is also seen in the definition of political discourse as given by Graber (1981: 196). As he sees, political discourse includes both formal and informal political contexts and political actors operating in political environments to achieve political objectives. This conception gives rise to the following problem: how do we consider, as Wilson (2001: 399) questions, the work of Liebes and Ribak (1991) on family discussions of political events? Is this political discourse or family discourse of the political?

2. Defining political discourse:

Defining political discourse by simply referring to authors and actors is very limited as a definition (cf. Van Dijk, 1998). Since legal, medical, and educational discourse include the next participants, respectively, lawyers and defendants, doctors and patients, and teachers and students, so does a political discourse. This is to mean that political activity requires the intervention of the following groups: citizens and voters, people as members of pressure and issue groups, demonstrators and dissidents, and so on (see Verba et al, 1993).

These groups participate in the operation of politics. Thus, they take part in political discourse. The point that is worth making is that relating politics and consequently political discourse to the public sphere makes the appearance of other participants possible (see Van Dijk, 1998: 12).

Another basic characteristic of political discourse resides in the fact that it is produced by politicians (cf. Van Dijk, 2001: 05). This obligatorily excludes those discourse genres at the boundaries of the field of politics with other domains, such as: the discourse of a student demonstration. In spite of the fact that such a discourse may have some influence on political decision making, still it is far from being a political discourse. In effect, this discourse belongs to another social domain. On the opposite, a bill about education

policies is a genre of political discourse in spite of the fact that its objectives are totally restricted to education (see Van Dijk, 2001: 05).

Given the fact that political discourse is produced by a politician, then it must be produced in an institution. In short, political discourse is an institutional discourse. So as to a discourse must be political, it must be uttered or written by a politician in an institutional setting (see Van Dijk, 2001; Baylon, 1991). In addition, political discourse must also reach a political act in an institution, such as governing (cf. Van Dijk, 2001).

A final characteristic of political discourse lies in the idea that it is a class of genres defined by the domain of politics (see Van Dijk, 2001). This signifies that government deliberations, parliamentary debates, party programs, and presidential speeches are genres of political discourse. Defining the genres of political discourse rests upon context, the kind of profession the political speaker is occupying, the institution where the discourse is communicated, the result the political discourse intends to achieve, and finally the consequences of the political discourse: laws legislated, policies decided, or laws reviewed.

3. Conclusion:

To conclude, political discourse is very complex to define in the realm of discourse analysis. In spite of the fact that it is a discourse type, still it has its own distinguishing features. Unlike other discourse types, political discourse includes many genres. These genres are defined solely by politics.

So as to a discourse could be qualified as being political, it must contain at least the next elements. First, the speaker or writer must be a politician by profession. Second, the discourse must be communicated in an institution. Third, the discourse must achieve a result.

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