

Discourse Communities Uncovered Chelsie Hazenstab

Discourse community may seem like a fancy word, but when it is broken down in to bite-size, manageable chunks, it will change the way we define our world. Discourse is using words to express thoughts and ideas (Merriam-Webster Discourse, 2014). A community, as we would expect, is simply a body of people. When we put the two words together, we get a group of people that use words to express thoughts and ideas. While the complete concept of discourse communities is a little bit more involved than that, we get the basic idea. John Swales, a leading technical communication researcher and professor of linguistics, starts off with a simple definition: discourse communities are groups that are united under a common goal, and they have their own way of communicating to achieve those goals (Swales, 1990). Swales and other researchers, however, do not just leave the definition at that.

Through this essay, we will cover a more exact definition of a discourse community, as well as covering some of the relationships with other literary devices that are associated with discourse communities. Even though there are many conflicting definitions and aspects of discourse communities, we will be focusing mainly on the research performed by John Swales, as well as a few others. Because discourse community is such a widely researched area of study, it would be impossible to cover every single aspect and conflict. We will, however, cover suggestions for research that can be done in the future, both on discourse communities and related topics.

What is a discourse community?

Discourse communities are everywhere we look. Our earlier definition says that they are groups of people that have a common goal, and they used language and words to

unite under that goal. If we continue to think about discourse communities with a broad definition, we can conclude that these groups are any groups that we identify with. For example, students are considered a discourse community, though they may be identified as an academic discourse community, which some researchers say is slightly different. Using our definition, students are united under a specific goal, which is education, and they speak and write in an academic way. Scientists, baseball teams, and grandma's knitting club are also considered their own discourse communities because they all have their own common goal and their own language.

Unfortunately, discourse communities cannot be so easily defined. There are many other aspects of the concept that are continually being disputed, researched, and revisited. According to Swales, however, there are six characteristics that define a discourse community (Swales, 1990):

1. *Common Goals.* He first says that discourse communities must have a common goal, and these goals must be agreed upon, as well as public. Swales explains that the goal does not reference a common object of study, but an actual goal, or purpose. For example, when we used students as a discourse community, their common, public goal is to just make it through four years of college, whereas their "object of study" is their individual majors. There is no secret agenda of these students; and, after graduating from high school, most students automatically enter into this discourse community. From a professional standpoint, if you were to look at lawyers as a discourse community, they are united under the common goal of practicing the law, while their object of study is understanding and communicating the law.

2. *Mechanisms of Intercommunication.* Swales says that in order to be a discourse community there needs to be some sort of mechanism for intercommunication between the members of the community. Discourse communities use meetings, newsletters, emails, blogging, et cetera, to communicate. Swales' paradigm that involves the owners of several cafes brings things into perspective. These owners are all under the same common goal, but they are not all a part of the local chamber of commerce. They share types of businesses, but they do not know each other and there are no mechanisms of intercommunication between them. Therefore, the question arises. Are they still a part of the same discourse community? Some would say yes because they share a common goal, but if a discourse community needs all six of Swales characteristics, a different conclusion could be made.
3. *Participatory Mechanisms.* Swales uses the example of an association sending out a monthly journal to its members. If they do not open the journal or read it, they cannot be considered as a part of the community. A discourse community depends on the transferring of information and feedback associated with the use of these mechanisms. For example, if one was a member of that same local chamber of commerce, they would be considered in the same discourse community. If they do not read the emails that the chamber sends or use the resources that the chamber provides, however, then they cannot truly be a part of the chamber's discourse community because there is no transfer of information or feedback to the chamber.

4. *Genres*. The use of multiple genres within a discourse community is imperative. In fact, we will cover the importance of genre later, but, for now, genres are how we achieve the communication and information transfer in discourse communities. Swales says, “these [genres] may involve appropriacy of topics, the form, function and positioning of discursal elements” (pg.26). Groups also have the ability to ‘borrow’ genres and make them their own. By borrowing the genres, discourse communities absorb the different aspects of other communities, which could explain why we have things like different forms of Christianity. Each form of Christianity has adopted the Bible, which is a collection of stories, prophecies, and letters, as a form of communication and information transfer, but some religions have made the Bible their own by adding and subtracting books. It should be noted that some scholars, like Herman Paul, do not believe that forms of Christianity are considered discourse communities, but rather collected memories of communities (Paul, 2007).
5. *Speech Communities*. Swales has done quite a bit of research on speech communities, and in doing so, he has determined that discourse communities have their own types of speech, as well as ways of conveying information. During Swales’ first round of research into the concept, he determined that these speech communities were purely written. Almost ten years later, he revisited this aspect of speech communities and concluded that speech communities can be both written and oral (Borg, 2003). A good example of speech communities in action is jargon. We have all been there when someone uses a term or acronym that we do not understand, like when computer technicians use PDI or when some

people look at HTML and all they see is a jumbled mess (Kaltenbach, 2000).

While HTML, hypertext markup language, is a language all on its own, much of the other technical words that are used in discourse communities are considered jargon. Jargon, which will be explained a little further later on, is one of the only characteristics of a discourse community that can be picked out right away by someone outside of the discourse community, meaning you do not have to be a rocket scientist to know that a propulsion system is a fancy word for an engine.

6. *Way of life.* Swales concludes his characteristics with saying that discourse communities are often entered into at the most elementary stages. Normally, however, there are not all novices in the community. According to Swales, there is a distinct ratio of novices to experts that is necessary for the community to survive. He also mentions that leaving discourse communities can be harder than one would expect. "Discourse communities have changing memberships; individuals enter as apprentices and leave by death or in other less involuntary ways" (pg. 27).

In addition to the characteristics that Swales lays out for discourse communities, it is important to mention that "academic or professional discourse communities are not necessarily located in specific physical settings, but rather their existence can be inferred from the discourse that members of disciplinary subspecialty use to communicate with each other" (Ackerman, Berkenkotter, & Huckin, 1991). Swales (1990) notes, in one of his examples, that individual members of a discourse community do not have to ever actually meet. "The [members] never gather together physically; instead a newsletter that has a particular form of text organization, making it a genre, which they use to pursue their goals,

unites them” (Borg, 2003). A more recognizable example than the one Swales uses would be various fanfiction sites. Many of the members of the fanfiction community are from different places around the world and have never met. They are united under the common goal of creating stories for their favorite television show or book, while using their own language at the same time, including acronyms. Discourse communities know no bounds. The communities themselves can take on lives of their own, and “cast its discursive net over boundaries of geographic location, cultural background, socio-economic status, and even time—the dead may participate in discourse communities if their ideas and texts survive” (Borg, 2003).

It is interesting to know, that with all of his research on discourse communities, even Swales (1990) was not immediately accepted as a full member of his community (pg. 28). Many times we enter into discourse communities, and we do not even know it. By default, we are a part of so many discourse communities, both professionally and personally, that it is sometimes hard to keep them all straight. A common problem for many people is the transition from high school to college or undergrad to graduate. “Students, it seem[s], [have] to leave behind their home discourses and conform totally to the academic” (Bizzell, 1999). Like Swales, ‘Nate’ was trying to enter into a discourse community in a study performed by Carol Berkenkotter, Thomas Huckin, and John Ackerman. The study follows Nate and his writing during his time in graduate school. For those of us who have gone on to further their education in graduate school, we have all experienced the transformation from outsider to insider. There is something to be said having written your first couple graduate school papers, and it takes some time to be fully considered a part of the community. Ackerman et al. suggests other characteristics for

discourse communities, like a “model of knowing;” extension of the community; forums for communication, which differ from Swales’ mechanisms of communication; and initiation into the community.

The “model of knowing” is the research methodology and language that the discourse community uses. These aspects of ‘knowing’ are encapsulated within the community and must be learned. The extension of the community is when there is research and papers written with cohorts and other universities, in the case of graduate students that is. In the professional world, collaborative works are common; for example much of the work that a chamber of commerce does would be considered collaborative work and thereby an extension of the community. The forums of communication are not the same as Swales’ mechanisms of communication. Rather than emails, newsletters, and meetings, Ackerman et al. use publication sources as the forums of communication. In their case, papers and publications are used as a way to instruct, correct, and adapt to the community. Outside of the academic discourse community, one might find one of these forums of communication on political websites, where members, or potential members, express their opinions and there is a discussion or debate. Finally, Ackerman et al. explains that, in the case for graduate students, there is an initiation into the discourse communities. While hazing is not impossible, Ackerman et al. uses “the reading and writing they do, through instruction in research methodology, and through interaction with faculty and with their peers” (pg. 193), as the initiation into the academic research community. Looking outside of the graduate school example that Ackerman et al. uses, the initiation step should be similar. For example, when a person first starts at a company they must show a certain amount of worthiness before they are accepted into the community; sometimes that

worthiness is the amount of years one has been there, or even the completion of a big project, like a major court case.

Swales, however, is not the only researcher that has done extensive research on discourse communities. Patricia Bizzell, a professor at College of the Holy Cross (Bizzell, 2014), has done extensive studies on discourse communities and what affects them or the effects they have on the individual members (Bizzell, 1992). Politics have a very conflicting effect on discourse communities. On one hand they can pull the members apart when they do not agree or align themselves with the same political party. On the other hand, these politics, if that is what unites them under a single goal, can bring the individual members together. Moreover, Bizzell explains that the politics can have a whole other effect on discourse communities. Many times, the politics are not in terms of right and left wing, but in terms of a power struggle. There is a hierarchy of power in a discourse community, and “[s]omeone will always be ready to exercise what David Bartholomae has called a ‘rhetoric of combination’ (1985), bringing oppositions into jarring contact that generates a new idea” (pp. 235).

Furthermore, discourse communities can affect the individual members socialization and his or her success. Bizzell says that “...in a discourse community, shared conventions of language use affect[s] social status, world view, and work” (pp. 9). When you take what we have already said about discourse communities, this make sense, but it will make more sense once we incorporate jargon. Another aspect of discourse is the qualifications to be able to speak in the discourse community (Porter, 1986). Discourse communities have “shared conventions of language use [that] affect social status, world view, and work” (Bizzell, 1999). These conventions of language can determine the social

status (high or low) within the community. Many, including Bizzell, maintain that the idea of discourse communities are unfair, but there is little that anyone can do to get rid of them. Bizzell does, however, produce a hybrid way of teaching within discourse communities, instead of the natural 'sink or swim' paradigm that many researchers have applied to discourse communities (Bizzell, 1999).

Discourse Communities and Jargon

Jargon is the technical term for that technical speech that discourse communities use in their everyday language. 'Discourse community' in itself is jargon for the technical writing and rhetoric community. Since the concept of discourse communities is so multifaceted, an explanation of the concept would be lacking if it did not include jargon. Considering that members of a community tend to have interpersonal relationships, they, therefore, tend to share information and language with each other. This concept is known as 'shared knowledge.' This shared knowledge includes more than just the knowledge of the field that the discourse community resides in (Stygall, 1991), and the use of shared language too. Swales introduces the use of jargon in his six characteristics of discourse communities when he talks about speech communities. While there are other aspects of speech communities, jargon is the main component; and, quite possibly, it is the most important.

Some researchers of jargon take a much more relaxed approach to the definition of discourse communities, but add more to the idea itself, like Cristopher Broyles, a doctoral student at Texas Tech University. He uses a much broader definition of discourse communities, saying that, "[p]eople who interact together and regularly exchange ideas constitute a discourse [community]" (Broyles, 2011), but he proposes that there are several

levels in discourse groups. Discourse communities understand the language and words that they speak, but outside of the primary discourse community, others understand in different degrees.

There is the primary discourse community, which is the individual members themselves; and for our example, we will look at botanists on a college campus. Then there is the extended discourse community, which is just outside the primary discourse community. The extended discourse community knows the workings of the primary discourse community, but they are not insiders. An example of the extended group would be the rest of the biology fields. They know most of what the botanists are talking about, and they understand most of what goes on, as well as the jargon, but they may not use the same mechanisms of communication, like botanist-specific, academic journals. After that, there are the first-degree outsiders. First-degree outsiders would be the people that are in other fields, like the rest of the science, technology, engineering, mathematics (STEM) fields. They can read and keep up with the goings-on of the botanists, but they may not understand the jargon the primary discourse community uses, nor would they publish articles in the same types of journals. Second-degree outsiders are people who are not in the STEM fields and they do not understand the language and jargon that is used in the primary discourse community, but they should be able to follow along. A good example of this group would be the rest of the colleges. They are familiar with the academic language and familiar with reading the 'genres' (e.g. case studies, research theses) that the primary discourse uses. Finally, there are third-degree outsiders. These people have no idea what the jargon means, nor do they know the genres or the concepts that the primary discourse community are trying to convey (Broyles, 2011).

When we understand these degrees of discourse communities, it can help reduce the amount of communication complications that occur between them. For example, the United States government is in one discourse community and its citizens are in another. There are many communication issues between the 'people' and the 'man,' and part of this problem is because the government is using terms and language, not to mention genres, that people outside of their discourse community do not understand. While this is also a problem of with genre, not communicating or writing with the right audience in mind, it can lead to more problems if the discourse community's goal is to work with other discourse communities outside their own.

Jargon can sometimes make the discourse community (Kaltenbach, 2000), even though, in some cases, discourse communities are formed around the jargon that has previously been established. Some of the first online discourse communities were developed after the jargon or at the same time the jargon was created. For example, with the creation of the Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA) in the 1960s, online discourses were literally formed simultaneously with the ARPANET. The APRANET was the first email system to be created and conversations were immediately more relaxed. They still had their business jargon, but with the new invention, a new language was formed. Later on down the online, evolutionary path, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the bulletin board system (BBS) was created. BBS gave way to a whole new discourse community when the original discourse community split in two. To distinguish themselves from the original discourse community, the second discourse community created their own jargon. When the online discourse communities needed to have "netiquette' standards," yet a new discourse community formed. The Internet, as we know it, was formed in the 1990s and may quite

possibly be the largest discourse community to ever be formed. It is important to note, however, that “Swales [presents] several reasons why speech community is not a significant notion for socio-rhetorical purposes, all of them tied to the fact that socio-rhetorical discourse community must be relational in the way that speech community is not (1990:24)” (Miller, 2005 b). This means that jargon by itself lacks the social aspect of discourse communities and cannot stand alone.

Discourse communities can sometimes run into problems with jargon. Sometimes, many communities can use the same jargon. The words will be the same, but the meanings of the words can mean something completely different. The word ‘hacker,’ for instance, means two different things depending on which side of the legal systems the community is on. Another example would be the word ‘bean.’ To a biologist or a botanist this would mean the seed produced by a legume. If we were playing baseball, however, the pitcher would have just purposefully thrown the ball to hit the batter. There are also times when there are words used that seem to have universal definitions. Discourse communities “...sometimes use words that are free of any universal definition—even within their own discourse group or discipline; there is some degree of ‘understanding’ amongst the discourse participants as to what these words mean, but, by and large, the interpretations are highly subjective...” (Broyles, 2011). These are words are hard to find, but Broyles uses words like ‘adverse’ and ‘cause.’ The community and even outsiders generally know what these terms mean, but there still might be some question to the meaning.

Some uses of jargon in a discourse community cannot be helped. Discourse communities, like the legal community have no other option but to use the jargon that comes with their profession. The previously mentioned shared knowledge helps members

of discourse communities to translate the jargon in legal texts. These texts have to use these thick phrases and words repetitively so that there are no loopholes. Loopholes lead to overturned rulings, which defeats the community's common goal to uphold the law. Gail Stygall (1991) says that there are no good or bad legal texts, even though people outside the discourse might not understand it. Part of this problem will be addressed later when we talk about genre.

Continuing along the same vein, discourse communities are not necessarily bad, and there is a distinct difference between good and bad jargon (Hirst, 2003). It all depends on how the jargon words are defined and if they are defined for the different audiences. Russel Hirst says that jargon is not bad, but it is either badly used or badly formed. He continues to say that we should not treat all jargon the same and that jargon can really be broken down into what he calls the language of communication. This language of communication does not span to just the English language, but to all different languages, making it more difficult for those outside of the discourse to understand. There are ways to reduce the amount of jargon in communication, like reducing phrases, getting rid of repetitions, and overly complicated words (Hirst, 2003). There are more fun ways, however, to get rid of jargon. Some academic discourse communities, especially in the STEM fields, make their students explain simple concepts, like how plants use sunlight, as if they were talking to elementary school children. Some may see this as counterproductive since we take so much time to learn the jargon in the first place. Discourse communities may not be able to get rid of jargon in its entirety, but Broyles says the first step to reducing the amount of jargon a discourse community uses is to recognize they are using it and consider their audience.

Discourse Communities and Genre

Jargon may be the important technical words that discourse communities use, but the genres that discourse communities use are just as important. Genre is yet another term we must tackle that does not have one solid definition. Genre, in the literary sense, is normally defined as a literary device that has a specific content, language, and form (Merriam-Webster Genre, 2014). Carolyn Miller (1984)¹, another popular rhetorician, adds that genres must also be “defined by similarities in strategies or forms in the discourses, by similarities in audience, by similarities in modes of thinking, by similarities in rhetorical situations (Miller, 2005 a). Many researchers, however, bypass the traditional definition of written genre to define it as forms of language that have specific roles. For discourse communities, genre is the lifeblood that keeps all of the individual members together, and the roles of genre are constantly changing. “Genres organize and generate the exchange of language that characterize what we are referring to in this essay as discourse communities” (Bawarshi et al., 2003).

Miller has also said that the social nature is the common link between genre and discourse communities. She says that, “a classification of discourse will be rhetorically sound if it contributes to an understanding of how discourse works—that is, if it reflects the rhetorical experience of the people who create and interpret the discourse” (Miller, 2005a, pp. 21). Classifying discourses by genres is characterized by three factors: semantics, syntactics, and pragmatics (pp.21). Semantics is the actual meaning of the words that the genre uses, whereas syntactics is the form that the genre takes, like Swales’ mechanisms of communication. Finally, pragmatics is the purpose behind the genre that is

¹ Carolyn Miller originally published this article in 1984.
Miller, C. (1984). Genre as social action. *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 70 (1984) pp. 151-67.

being used. Miller does continue to say that there is more than one way to classify discourse, but this social nature of genre causes problems in the classification process.

Without the genres, discourse communities would not be able to complete two of the characteristics of Swales' definition, besides genre: the use of mechanisms of intercommunication and the use of participatory mechanisms. The problem with genre is very similar to the problem of jargon. Both Gail Stygall (1991) and Amy Devitt (2003) have taken a familiar problem with genre and put it into the perspective of discourse communities. Legal documents, specifically jury instructions in these cases, are hard for people outside of the legal discourse to understand. These instructions are for the jury, but they are also for the lawyers and judges. Stygall points out that we infer that the principle function of these legal texts is to be a simple transfer of information from the law to the people. In reality, these specific texts "cannot be 'improved' without understanding why lawyers continue to write what ordinary readers consider unreadable texts...the demands of the legal community's discourse conventions always take precedence over the needs of ordinary readers" (Stygall, 1991, pp. 234-235). She goes on to explain that genres, like those that are in the legal discourse community, must first serve the community, or the law in this case, and then the people. Devitt adds that, "the legal community—and our society—needs these distinctions, established by law and precedent, to be maintained" (Bawarshi et al., 2003). Devitt also says that it does not matter how eloquently written these texts are, it will still be impossible for ordinary discourse communities to understand with the jargon they must use.

It is not only the language that is hard to understand, but many times the forms are hard to translate. Another example Devitt uses is the example of tax forms. "Surprisingly,

many genres are designed within one specialist community for functions to be filled by nonmembers of that community” (Bawarshi et al., 2003). Devitt goes on to say that this is why many times the tax forms that are created by the IRS for the people are often taken to accountants, who would be considered the extended discourse community. Genres can lead the proverbial horse to water when it comes to discourse communities, but it cannot make them understand.

Finally, genres have also been called the “rhetorical maps that chart familiar or frequently traveled communicative paths...” (Bawarshi et al., 2003). All of these genre paths lead outsiders into the community, while showing them how to participate and become an insider (Miller, 2005 a). Miller also says that genre is so much more than just a literary form; it is a realistic and rhetorical social action. Genre is not just a simple aspect of discourse communities either. Swales says that “...genres belong to discourse communities...” (Swales, 1990). In a way, genre takes away the individual members’ rights to be able to change the forms of communication (Miller, 2005 b).

Future research of discourse communities

While it seems that there have been hundreds of studies on discourse communities and there is not much left to study, there are always new aspects to cover in discourse communities. Not only are there these new aspects, but like the research done by Miller and Swales, there are always plenty of aspects that can be revisited and put into different views. Considering that this essay would never be able to complete a full comprehensive study on discourse communities, there is plenty of other research that we could have looked at related to discourse communities. We briefly mentioned Russel Hirst and his work with discourse communities and jargon, but there is an opportunity to cover more

ground on jargon and discourse communities in other languages. Genre analysis, which is Swales main area of study, is also an expansive subject on its own.

Conclusion

Discourse communities can be defined simply as the group of people with which one shares a common goal, but as we have covered, there is a lot more to that definition. The next time you read a journal article that uses the jargon that you do not understand, remember to take a step back and think about what is happening. You are entering into a discourse community and are learning a whole new language. Eventually, there will come a time when all of the jargon and genres will make sense and you will see your discourse community in a whole new light. We must continue to remind ourselves that the social nature of discourse communities is what keeps the community from falling apart, and discourse communities could not exist if not for jargon and genre.

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