

Review of Discourse Power from the Perspective of Social Constructionism

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Abstract: *The world discourse system is being deconstructed and reconstructed. The cultural hegemony under the Western discourse system is gradually being broken, which makes us recognize the necessity of strengthening international communication capacity building in the new situation, and present a true, three-dimensional and comprehensive China to the international community. Social constructionism is concerned with understanding how the construction of “meaning” is connected to the power imbalance in our society. In this paper, I propose that from the perspective of social constructionism, it is helpful to analysis how the construction of meaning affect the discourse.*

Keywords: *Chinese discourse, Discourse power, Social Constructionism*

1. Introduction

At present, the international social order is being rebuilt, and the Western discourse system is gradually disintegrating. Many scholars have proposed theories for constructing a Chinese discourse system. However, few have analysed social constructionism the construction of a Chinese discourse system from the perspective of constructionism. Since the beginning of the 20th century, the wave of globalisation has been sweeping, and civilisation conflicts and integration have occurred, leading to the long-term weak position of Chinese discourse. From the perspective of culture, a few factors should be considered: What is the discourse power? How should the Chinese discourse be constructed now? More disciplines need to collaborate to construct Chinese discourse system.

2. Analysis of Discourse Power From the Perspective of Social Constructionism

2.1. Discourse Power

Discourse power originates from Foucault’s discussion of knowledge. Foucault closely linked power and discourse. He believed that knowledge is power, and knowledge implements power through discourse to achieve the purposes of imprisonment and enlightenment. Initially, Foucault was interested in the “analysis of systems,” such as health systems, sexuality, and governance^[1]. However, socio-political changes in Europe (the 1960s–1970s) directed his thinking from philosophical and psychological analysis (pre 1960s) to historical analysis (post-1960s). After the 1960s, Foucault moved his attention to an analysis of the internal structure of knowledge and discourse in terms of the processes of power relations and their impact on individuals or society as a whole. The History of Sexuality (1978) is a vivid example of Foucault’s genealogical analysis^[2], in which he was concerned with functions of power and describing the ‘history of the present, including the processes of how truth is formed and the conditions under which some utterances, statements, propositions, and a particular version of knowledge come to be seen as truth, rather than merely analysing truth. Accordingly, this truth-making process is a discursive one, in which power relations are embedded, and an individual engages in constructing their subjectivity^[3]. Later, Edward W. Said (2003) further analysed the relationship between power and discourse, revealing that the essence of the Western discourse system is cultural hegemony^[4]. Said, whose analysis of power and discourse unmasked the hegemony of Western culture and the rapid development of ‘Orientalism’ in the West since the 18th century, aimed to help the West understand the East. Traditional orientalism is based on a Western philosophical view of the Eastern world, which is detached from the real Eastern culture. Therefore, Oriental scholars should break away from this Orientalism, which is based on the Western discourse system, and build their own discourse system to present the real East to the world. Currently, China needs to build its own discourse system, therefore scholars should break the construction of the international communication system and spread a true and three-

dimensional image of China, we must break the Western discourse system, and grasp the power of discourse.

2.2. Social Constructionism

American sociologists T. Luckman and P. Berger (1967) introduced the term constructionism in their book *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, in which they proposed that social groups and individual people who interact with one another within a system of social classes over time create concepts (mental representations) of the actions of one another and that people become habituated to those concepts and thus assume reciprocal social roles^[5]. Luckman and Berger also noted that when those social roles are available to and for other members of society to assume and portray, their reciprocal, social interactions are said to be institutionalised behaviours. In that process of the social construction of reality, the meaning of the social role is embedded in society as cultural knowledge, which refers to the fact that in everyday life, people are the product of the society they actively create for themselves and that social structures are the sum of ‘patterns of interaction’. Constructivist epistemology holds that knowledge is not a simple, passive representation of the external world; rather, the subject actively constructs external information on the basis of existing knowledge and experience. The social constructivist view of language holds that it is impossible to understand the world objectively or to determine universal truths about it. This is because knowledge (meaning) derives from social construction. Knowledge is not an objective existence independent of the person but is an active construction by the person in the activity of knowing the external world. This construction takes place in the context of interaction with others and is the result of social interaction.

Social constructionism holds that language provides categories and classifications for people to understand the world and ourselves so that we can classify consciousness and psychology and use it to explain new experiences; it does not express thinking but prescribes thinking. Social constructionism focuses on the meaning-building characteristics of language and believes that the meaning of language is obtained through social interdependence. Language is also a kind of behaviour, and language has the characteristics of action. Therefore, when analysing discourse power, we should realise that knowledge is not a simple and passive representation of the external world; rather, the subject actively constructs external information based on existing knowledge and experience. When we use knowledge for discourse analysis, we have entered the process of information construction or discourse system construction.

The ‘constructivist’ paradigm emerged after ‘deconstructionism’ broke down old structures and systems, a sceptical and discursive spirit that denied old rationality and deconstructed old systems but failed to bring about new rationality and did not have the capacity to build. In contrast, the constructivist research paradigm confronts the historical limitations of the existing research paradigm and starts from the basic concepts of the translation system, such as philosophical foundations, epistemological foundations, truth concepts and linguistic foundations, emphasising language as a medium of social interaction, ‘breaking’ and then ‘This is the “construction” of language. Scholars of social constructionism have argued that language provides people with categories and classifications for understanding the world and ourselves, enabling us to categorise consciousness and the psyche and to use them to interpret new experiences. Constructionism is concerned with the meaning-constructing properties of language and argues that meaning in language is acquired through social interdependence. Language is also an act, and language has the character of an action. In this way (according to the constructivist view of language), it is impossible to understand the world objectively or to determine universal truths about it. This is because knowledge (meaning) derives from social construction. Knowledge is not an objective existence independent of the person but an active construction in the activity of knowing the external world. This construction takes place in the context of interaction with others and is the result of social interaction.

2.3. Discourse Analysis

An analysis of discourse systems should begin with a clear understanding of discourse analysis, and the birth of discourse analysis is closely linked to constructivist philosophical epistemology. Discourse analysis is a method of studying language based on the philosophical assumptions of social constructionism. Scholars of discourse analysis have explored and explained the organisational and usage characteristics of language through the observation of language in actual use and explains the constraints in language in terms of its communicative function and the cognitive characteristics of language users. Discourse analysis is also influenced by structural and poststructuralist philosophies, which combine the

two perspectives of 'language' and 'thought'. Discourse analysis is a method of studying language that explores the organisational and usage characteristics of language through the observation of the language in use. Discourse analysis have explained the constraints on language in terms of its communicative function and the cognitive characteristics of its users. Both Scholars structuralism and poststructuralism have argued that human thoughts, experiences, and emotions are not simply external reactants but constructs of discourse. Discourse analysis from a social constructivist perspective focuses on discovering the function or effect of language or discourse in constructing the world and reshaping reality. In this mode of analysis, the action or practical character of discourse is amplified, and the social effects of language or discourse (their externalisation or objectification or the internalisation of knowledge) are given a more important status. Thus, instead of dismembering the structure of discourse, discourse analysis based on social constructivism understands discourse, as well as its construction and reconstruction, in relation to society from the perspective of the society with which it is closely linked. Scholars social constructionism have assumed that facts are multiple and that the mind's perception of external existence is constructed, not simply a reflection of objective reality, let alone a mere representation of the real world. This thinking is in line with structural linguistics' argument against the separation of language and thought and Foucault's discussion of 'knowledge and power'. Therefore, Oriental scholars should break away from this Orientalism, which is based on the Western discourse system, and build their own discourse system so as to present the real Orientalism to the world.

3. Analysis of the Construction of Chinese Discourse Through the Lens of Social Constructionism

The analytical character of constructionism, that is, social constructionism, provides an analytical approach to the analysis of China's discourse system. From a constructivist perspective, the image of the state is not that of a mere political, economic, or cultural strength but a perception resulting from the long-term interaction between states in the international system, carried by the communication discourse between states. There is a distinction between 'my image' and the 'other image' that depends on the subject and purpose of communication. 'The goal of China's foreign communication is to transform the "my image" that the government wishes to create into an internationally recognised "other image"^[6]. It is the discourse in international communication that constructs the image of China in the eyes of others.

The constructivist paradigm emerged after deconstructionism broke down old structures and systems. Deconstructionism was a spirit of skepticism and broken discourse that denied old rationality and deconstructed old systems but failed to bring about new rationality and could not build (Hu, 2010). In contrast, the 'constructivist' research paradigm confronts the historical limitations of the existing research paradigm and emphasises that translation is a language-mediated social interaction activity from the basic concepts of the translation system, such as the philosophical foundation, the epistemological foundation, the truth concept, and the linguistic foundation, when the existing research paradigm cannot become the research paradigm of translation. To 'break' and then 'build' is to 'construct'. Social constructionism argues that shared understanding, shared knowledge, and communal expectations constitute the essence of the relationship between the acts of the international system; that material factors, such as a country's economy, military power, and material resources, are of limited significance in themselves; that it is only through the structure embedded in shared knowledge that they (shared understanding, shared knowledge, and communal expectations) have a substantial impact on human activities and international relations; and that the structure of the international system is largely the result of the distribution of ideas among participating states^[7]. Social constructionism theory contains two basic principles: (a) the structure of human relations is determined primarily by shared ideas rather than material forces, and (b) the identities and interests of purposeful actors are constructed from these shared ideas rather than being naturally inherent^[8]. 'When language serves national interests, it becomes part of core international competitiveness and an important expression of national soft and hard power^[9].' Therefore, understanding how to effectively play the advantage of language resources to build a discourse system with Chinese characteristics and enhance national discourse competence is crucial to presenting and shaping China's national image, building China's international identity, and fighting for China's discourse power in the international community. The Chinese government should seek a breakthrough point in constructionism, away from the shackles of structural functionalism. Constructionism will become a keyword for the further understanding and communication of culture and society. Discourse analysis based on social constructionism does not focus on finding the recurrence of a structural element in a discourse, the social meaning of a structural element or grammatical item, or the inequalities implied in a discourse^[10]. Discourse analysis based on social constructionism focuses more on discovering the function or effect of language or discourse in constructing the world and reshaping reality. In this mode of analysis, the action or practical character of discourse is amplified, and the social effects of language

or discourse (their externalisation or objectification or the internalisation of knowledge) are given a more important status.

4. Construction of the Chinese Discourse

The study of national discourse is an important part of the study of national language proficiency. The study of national language competence emerged in the late 20th century and was introduced by Brecht and Walton (1993). It was at the beginning of the 21st century that national discourse competence began to receive widespread attention, marked by the first International Forum on Frontiers in Language Communication (2011), where Chinese and foreign scholars debated national communication, national discourse competence, and national rhetoric. Since the 19th century, the Chinese literati have been in the mode of cultural and literary borrowing, which has led to the long-term weakness of Chinese discourse. As Judith Revel^[11] has pointed out, the 'discursive order' of a certain period of time has a certain normative and regulatory function, but it requires the production of knowledge, strategies, and practices to bring the organisational mechanisms of reality into play. Social reality is constructed, and the subject of knowledge is not the transcendental subject of the traditional philosophy of the subject but a formal subject with different subjectivities depending on the location of the social practice^[12]. To understand this 'construction', one has to start with an understanding of social practices, specifically the rules of knowledge and discourse formation in the field of practice, and to think about the configuration of the technologies of rights (more in the form of the setting, arrangement, and procedures of nondiscursive practices) without relying on the transcendental imagination of the subject, detached from real social practices.

Chinese discourse has long been in a 'weak' position^[13] in the international community, with literary theory 'lost' and international discourse 'weak', both of which are issues that need to be addressed in the construction of China's discourse system. From a constructivist epistemology, the world discourse system should first be deconstructed. The world discourse system under cultural hegemony is in fact a Western discourse system, and the Eastern discourse system is a Western construction of the Eastern world. As Said (2019,29) noted, the cultural discourse and cultural communication of a cultural system does not usually contain a 'truth' but only an expression of it. Language itself is a highly systematic system of coding, with many means of expressing, revealing, communicating information, and making representations. Everything about the East is therefore outside of the East: The meaning of Orientalism depends more on the West than on the East, a meaning center that derives directly from the many Western techniques of expression that make the East visible, palpable, and 'present' in the discourse about it. Just as Foucault's discourse is power, Western culture uses the power at its disposal to shape the East into a Western imaginary East. The image of the East is constantly constructed under the domination of the West, The East is stereotyped under the constant cultural hegemony of the West, and the Eastern discourse remains subdiscursive.

Therefore, to build a Chinese discourse, the existing discourse system should be deconstructed to break the long-standing cultural hegemony of the West. Discover the 'way' of Chinese culture, and build China's own 'way' of discourse.

5. Conclusions

Discourse analysis based on social constructionism focuses more on discovering the function or effect of language or discourse in constructing the world and reshaping reality. Analyzing social discourse through the perspective of social constructionism helps people understand the relationship between discourse and society from the perspective of construction and reconstruction. Whether Chinese discourse or Chinese literary theory has long been in a 'weak' position in the international community, both of which are issues that need to be addressed in the construction of China's discourse system. The construction of discourse system from the perspective of social constructionism has positive significance in building a discourse system with Chinese characteristics by utilizing the advantages of language resources, enhancing the national discourse capacity, presenting and shaping China's national image, constructing China's national identity in the international community, and striving for China's discourse power in the international community.

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