# REQUIREMENTS OF DICURSIVE RATIONALITY IN REGARD TO THE DISCOURSE OF Ph.D. THESES IN SOCIAL SCIENCES

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**Abstract**: *One's meta-discursive focus on one's own discourse is a natural thing to do once the research interest lies in the field of social sciences. The projected discourse does not regard only the mere organization of a scientific text round the dense nuclei of assigned significations composing it, but also a set of limitations resulting from the particularities of the text's production context and its reception. Due to the fact that the intended scientific text, belonging to a specialized production and performance background, characterized by norms concerning the manner of writing and defending a doctoral thesis, cannot be analyzed within intended textualization standards of any scientific content, the analysis of the text production is highly recommended as well. As a result, projection through discursive approaches, namely, through discourse analysis, offers the possibility of a discursive organization of the dynamic relation text – context, in order for it to meet specific requirements, with regard not only to the scientific content, but also to the circumstances of the text's production and reception, including adjacent constraint, the communicative competence implying at least the semantic, socio-linguistic and semiotic-linguistic dimensions, organized round the discursive competence (Charaudeau, 2001, 2002), respectively, the correct definition of the discursive framework and the appropriate identification of discursive strategies.*

**Keywords**: *discourse, meta-discursive approach, scientific discourse, doctoral thesis, requirements of discursive rationality.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION. DEFINING DISCOURSE AS A VARIABLE

Doctoral theses represents a particular type of academic discourse mainly because of the social conventions marking all the components of this speech situation, from the socially assigned statuses characterizing both speaker and hearers to the specific setting needed for the final act of defending the thesis. A proper definition of discourse as a variable notion should take into account both text and context by investigating these two dimensions not in an additive manner but from a broader point of view, as interdependent components. This has also been a constant shift in the domain of pragmatics and discourse studies in the last decades. According to van Dijk (1998:3),

discourse analysis should focus on production and performance equally: '*In sum, discourse studies are about talk and text in context*'. A similar point of view is advanced, for example, by Maingueneau (2007:48), for whom every discourse is contextualized and may even change its own context during its enunciation.

The preparation and the defense of a Ph.D. thesis require a special focus on the textual dimension of the discourse and also on the context, which will be defined in this study as '*the total social setting in which the speech event takes place*' (Mey, 2001:30). In the case of doctoral theses, the context is pre-established or conventionalized and for this reason we have chosen to use a definition able to integrate both dimensions, but at the same time which enables the researcher to address

especially the role of the 'text'. H.G. Widdowson' studies seemed particularly relevant to us, because of the interest for the role of the text in the configuration of the discourse. In his critics' opinion, one of the main dichotomies discussed by him is the text/discourse dichotomy, where *'text is re-conceived as the starting point or alternatively the trace of discourse'* (Cook, Seidhofer, 2001:11). For Widdowson, the difference between text and discourse includes the notion of intended meaning: '(…) *the term discourse is taken here to refer both to what a text producer meant by a text and what a text means to the receiver'* (Widdowson, 2007:6).

In Eco's terms (1996:25), the intended discourse implies an emphasis on two of the three possible interpretive intentions: *intentio auctoris*, viewing the interpretation of the message as research and *intentio lectoris*, where interpretation connotes imposition. What remains left – or at least partially left – aside is interpretation as investigation, *intentio operis*, since the doctoral thesis implies research work for the text production and the evaluating reading done by the members of the doctoral scientific board. However, this does not necessarily mean that an academic or a scientific text cannot constitute a work in itself or that it does not speak by itself, regardless what the author intends to convey.

Focusing on features as the organization, production and performance of the discourse, various definitions of this variable have been in use in the field of discourse studies. Defining the variable 'discourse' from Widdowson's perspective may lead us to a broader frame of definitions, notwithstanding the fuzzy perspective (van Dijk, 1998:1), which approaches discourse by referring to other terms that are conceptually very close to it: language, communication, interaction, society, culture. Teun A. van Dijk (1998:2) distinguishes between three major levels which cannot be overlooked by a valid definition of discourse:

*Even after this first approximation to the concept of discourse, we already have encountered its three main dimensions: (a) language use, (b) the communication of beliefs (cognition), and (c) interaction in social situations.*

which shows that by using Widdowson's definition and focusing strictly on the text, the research is positioned at the first level, the one of language sciences.

Our discussion of doctoral theses as a particular form of scientific discourse is mainly aimed to summarize literature in the field of discourse studies and to draw attention to the fact that research is still needed especially regarding the possible variations in academic / doctoral discourse, due to cultural or institutional features and also to the particularities of the scientific field. The following two sections are focused on the doctoral discourse in relationship with its context while the other ones bring into discussion mainly the textual dimension, by enlisting and describing three major requirements needed for the achievement of discursive rationality.

## 2. THE DOCTORAL THESIS AS A DISURSIVE GENRE

A proper procedure for the analysis of a discourse needs to take into account discursive typologies and strategies and, by means of them, discourse forms and functions.

The discursive or the 'situational' genre as stated in Charaudeau (2002:312), which is to be understood in direct connection to more general communication domains or situations (for instance advertising, politics, media, science a.s.o.) represents a special type of meta-discourse which sums up variants deriving from the communication 'subcontracts', also called 'subgenres', and also specific formal restrictions at the level of sub-subgenres. Because of the topic discussed and of the constraints regarding the speech situation and contract, the text of a Ph.D. thesis belongs to the category of scientific discourse. Oriented scientific discourse (OSD) is a written form of discourse in the field of communication sciences, needing a multidisciplinary approach within the frame of social sciences. As a subgenre, OSD refers to the construction and performance of a highly

43

specialized scientific text, implying distinctive organizational features and at least two subgenres: the monograph, characteristic for humanities, theology and law and the compilation of secondary literature, characteristic for medicine, technology and natural sciences (Gustavii, 2008:91). What seems to be agreed upon is that there is no unique set of rules which can be valid across all disciplines in order to control the production of a Ph.D. thesis. Following the tradition of subgenre hybridization, the discursive production is not meant to draw clear-cut boundaries, as long as a thesis structure may vary '*from institution to institution and even from professor to professor in the same department of the same institution*' (Day, Gastel *apud* Gustavii, 2008:91). It seems more appropriate therefore to talk about the conventions deriving from the speech situation, conventions which may be either general or particular. In the first case, it is common knowledge that a thesis may be subject to certain constraints, which are similar for many scientific disciplines. For instance there are general conventions ruling the textual structure of a Ph.D. thesis, which must include an introduction, conclusions and the full list of references. Other kinds of general conventions are close to the requirements of the Gricean cooperative principle: the originality of the scientific content, the good understanding of the literature discussed, the accuracy of quotations, the clear presentation of the objectives, of the methodology used and of the outcomes, the explanation of the scientific relevance of the study, all these features may be viewed as corresponding to the maxims of quantity, quality, relevance and manner in the domain of scientific written and oral discourse. In regard to the particular conventions, these may derive from the research topic (for example, a thorough presentation of the corpus is needed if the thesis is based on corpus research) or from distinctive traits of the public or from the speech situation.

| SCIENTIFIC DISCOURSE | | |
|---|---|---|
| *specialized* | *for teaching purposes* | *for popularization* |

| | *specialized* | *for teaching purposes* | *for popularization* |
|---|---|---|---|
| Discursive focalization | explanatory argumentative | defining descriptive | descriptive |
| Semiotiv non-verbal codes | symbolic | iconic + symbolic | iconic |
| Reference | epistemological | | |
| Referentia-lization operations | concepts, hypotheses, theories, models | denomination, definition, categorization, exemplification | denomination, description, explanation |
| Rhetorical operation | graphic and general linguistic metaphor | idiolect linguistic metaphor | |
| Speech acts | argumentation (+ polemic) | denomination, argumentation (- polemic) | assertion, definition |

Fig.1. Subgenres of scientific discourse (*apud* Rovenţa-Frumuşani, 2005:192)

At a general level, OSD presupposes a low degree of affective involvement from the part of the speaker / writer, manifested through the use of a neutral tone, a reduced number of

subjectivity markers, the use of the scientific register. As a basic general rule, epistemic stance is privileged instead of affective stance but totally unbiased communication will always remain an ideal and expressions of stance are unavoidable even in academic discourse. Nevertheless, recent studies have shown that the use of subjectivity markers may vary according to the academic field (e.g. Charles *apud* Hunston 2007) which confirms the idea that distinct scientific domains create their own registers.

For a more precise description of the traits of OSD, we have used a representation of the subgenres of scientific discourse according to a set of discursiveness markers (see Fig.1). Following this representation, the Ph.D. thesis belongs to the subgenre of specialized discourse, implying as discursive focalization an explanatory / argumentative one, with epistemological references, by making use of concepts, hypotheses, theories and models as referentialization operations and argumentative speech acts. The polemic character of a doctoral thesis may constitute in itself a subject for further research and it can be stated only by an investigation which pays attention to the national, local or institutional culture.

According to the typology advanced by van Dijk (2003:73), the discourse of the doctoral thesis in social sciences is meant to fulfill the individual goals of the speaker/ writer and it is based on specific, highly abstract knowledge. Its reference is not formed by obvious reality but it places itself in contrast to the sciences which rely on information derived only from observation (Saussure 2004:147).

## 3. THE SPEAKER'S UNSTABLE BALANCING

An investigation of the doctoral thesis discourse within the limits of discursive pragmatics brings into discussion the specific dynamism of the speaker – hearer relationship and the socially assigned status of all interactants in this communication process. Research methods involving frames analysis or critical discourse analysis might not provide very useful tools for this particular speech

situation. One method takes into account the manner of constructing the interpretation, placing emphasis on the idea of the sociocultural context, while the other one values more the ways of discourse production and dissemination leading to social change.

The enunciation, from the point of view of discursive pragmatics, is seen as a way of constructing a reality and implies the establishment of a dynamic relationship between the interactants. In this relationship, the speaker engages in the truthfulness of the message conveyed by marking his/her status throughout the discourse. But the speaker's status itself may be called a 'semi-legitimate' one, a trait which leads to the act of unstable balancing between two positions. First, the speaker positions him/herself as an expert, whose discourse is meant to prove his/her authority in the scientific field. Second, the speaker's social status is that of a doctoral student and thus a candidate or simply a person being evaluated. In this case, the relationship with the hearers is asymmetrical and, by means of the discourse produced and performed, the speaker is in search of a support from the examiners for consolidating his/her identity. Paul Thomson (2005:32) highlights this unstable kind of balance between the speaker's positions and provides a possible answer to this dilemma of the discursive positioning of the doctoral student as a speaker towards the examiners as hearers:

*Doctoral candidates are in a peculiar position of being both experts, as well as examinees. It is important therefore both to assume a tone of authority, and, at the same time, establish that the writer is entitled to adopt a tone of authority. Claims must be backed up to evidence, and a comprehensive understanding of thinking, approaches and knowledge in their chosen fields of specialisation must be demonstrated, in order to persuade the most immediate readers (the examiners) that the thesis is worthy of the award of a doctorate.*

The speaker's need to find a balance for his/her double status is a result of the multiple publics or types of hearers to whom the message or the thesis is supposed to be conveyed. The most immediate type of public,

a 'primary' public, is composed of the members of the scientific board who take the decision of awarding or not the title. As Thompson points out, in this case the speech act is mainly persuasive but also it has a performative component (or at least it will lead to another performative act, the change in the speaker's status). A 'secondary' public is represented by the scientists, researchers forming the academic community, at various levels, from the local level of the institution awarding the title to the national or international level. The relationship to the primary public is clearly asymmetrical, while it is desirable that the relationship with the more general public should maintain a higher degree of symmetry.

A consequence of the oscillation in the power relations at work in this frame is also a specific way of directing the public in the act of reading, a way of signaling the intention which organizes the text. The specific trait of this reading guidance derives from the fact that the message conveyed is supposed to undergo a specific form of evaluation. As following, the speaker 1) presents the original content in relationship to the sources used (signals the intertextuality in particular ways by clearly pointing out which parts of the message are original and what is quoted, lists the models which have been used etc.); 2) provides a hierarchization of the scientific content, an internal evaluation of the message; 3) realizes a complex form of argumentation, having to justify his/her decisions regarding the research conducted, the chosen topic, the methods, the references used or the current of thought the thesis belongs to, but also to bring valid arguments for the outcomes of the study.

Intertextuality is a feature of academic works, not merely unavoidable, but even highly necessary. However, a characteristic of the doctoral thesis discourse remains the need for clearly setting the limits between the original discourse, assumed by the speaker, and the previous discourses or quoted sources (Jakobs 2003:895). Regarding the speaker-hearer relationship, this engagement is realized by indicating the utterances considered important, by using various strategies of ranking the scientific content, by indicating the

degree of certainty through the use of epistemic markers a.s.o.

## 4. DISCURSIVE TYPES AND STRATEGIES

As a type of discursive organization, the intended projection focuses on the expository genre which '*focuses attention upon a present time and place coincident with the convergence of reader and text*' (Beale, 1987:37) delimiting itself from the narrative and dramatic genres, unlikely to be used in scientific discourse. It is possible to determine the discursive strategies regarding the research topic and the specific discourse aspects starting from the conditions proposed by Charaudeau (2002:313) regarding the constraints, the goals (taking into account the distinction between the goal of the scientific research in itself and that of the discourse which is ultimately of a persuasive kind, i.e. to persuade the examiners that the candidate deserves the Ph.D. title), the speaker's positioning in regard to the hearer and his/her managing to fulfill his/her intention of identifying and surpassing the risks connected to the other interactants. Even if the discursive strategies might not be consciously used by the speaker, it is necessary that they should be carefully planned in the case of the final and broader project which includes not only the written text of the thesis but also the conversation taking place between the candidate and the examiners. The scientific text imposes the strategies necessary for its self-legitimization through the author's attempt to ratify him/herself by invoking expert sources: '*strategy of legitimization consists especially of recalling or reinforcing a position of authority*' (Charaudeau, 2002:314). The presentation of the research results, of the scientific essays written during the doctoral years and of the thesis as the final product of year-long research means a different kind of performance and therefore certain strategies should be taken into account in order to realize the hearers' 'captatio benevolentiae'.

A more detailed investigation from the meta-discursive perspective should pay

attention to the requirements of discursive rationality intended for the preparation and the defense of the thesis as these stages of the research process involve specific discursive requirements. These requirements can be studied alongside with the general 'impositions' of the discursive organization: cohesion/ coherence, informativity and relevance, which require a high level of discursive competence from the part of the hearer.

## 5. INTENDED COHESION AND COHERENCE

The textual cohesion refers to the syntactic unity of the text and is accomplished by marking the connection in a series of linguistic units: repetition of the same item in different sentences, the use of logical connectors, the use of segmentation markers, the unity of the pronouns (pronominal deictics), the unity of the verbal system a.s.o. Briefly, „*the identification of connections that are linguistically signalled like those between a pronoun and a previous noun phrase, enables us to recognize the* cohesion *of a text*" (Widdowson, 2007:45). In turn, coherence implies the unity at the level of the signified, the unity of meaning of a series of utterances which must refer to the same linguistic reality. Coherence is based on the idea of an addition to the meaning of each sentence taken separately and also on the idea of sustaining the global communicative intention (the illocutionary act). As Reboul and Moeschler (2010:153) put it, the coherence of a discourse is accomplished when every local informative intention (characteristic for every isolated utterance) supports the global informative intention (characteristic for the whole discourse).

The context of the production and presentation of a Ph.D. thesis requires a correlation between the text and the speech situation, which means to respect the rules for the production of an academic text, to include a correct discussion of the topic or to respect the limits of the scientific field. The illocutionary aspect of this speech act represents the force of the scientific statements included in the text and the speaker's intention to persuade the hearers regarding the scientific value of the text (of the research), the importance of the topic and his/her epistemic authority which has been acquired during the research period.

## 6. THE DEGREE OF INFORMATIVITY

Another essential requirement of the discursive rationality refers to informativity. For the Ph.D. thesis, the informativity of the OSD focuses on how to reach the desired degree of comprehension which should be assessed in relationship to the main public or publics, especially the evaluatory board of scientists in this case. The realization of informativity includes its own form of balancing two contrasting communicative goals. One of this goals is the unavoidable appeal to 'shared knowledge' (Sperber, Cummins, 2007:4) which functions as a prerequisite for all types of communication in its broadest sense. Without a common background shared by all participants it would be impossible for the message to be understood. At the same time, the informativity of the scientific discourse is accomplished by setting as an explicit objective the extension of the hearer's cognitive field. This neccessity of enlarging the hearer's knowledge starting from common, well established facts and notions, the act of balancing between the old and the new represents the requirement which is most representative for a doctoral thesis.

## 7. RELEVANCE/PERTINENCE OF CONTENTS

The ultimate major requirement of the intended discursive rationality is the one concerning relevance or pertinence of contents. Continuing Searle's studies on speech acts rationality, Herbert Paul Grice (1975) has included the maxim of relevance among his conversational maxims. Grice underlines the necessity of correlating intervention with the conversation topic, without adding any generalizing, useless propositions, without deforming the "cognitive

scale", the locutor being asked to agree with the context, with the time of the performance and with the purpose of the communication, and thus, the scientific discourse becomes strict with regard to meeting these imperative requirements. Charaudeau (2002:304) considers the principle of relevance as being a fundamental one and brings up the necessity of relating the discursive content with the Gricean principle of relevance:

*The* content *(propos) is that which echoes the relevancy principle, together with the idea that each situation belongs to a thematic domain, however general it might be'.*

The relevance of the research topic, from the angle of the study field resides in an analysis, from communicative perspective, of the appearance and development of sign systems under the historical evolution of cultural patterns within the linguistic community. Related to the cognitive rhetoric limitations and to the particular case of scientific discourse, *"we consider as pertinent any proposition that, placed next to shared knowledge, brings about new consequences"* (Sălăvăstru, 1997:622), that is, it offers the possibility of engaging creative and innovative dimension into the research process. By this positioning, with regard to the scientific text, pertinence and the informativity become inter-conditioned. Therefore, in order to avoid surpassing the limits of the reference cognitive area, informativity (inside shared knowledge) meets the requirement of integrality, which implies that the scientific information be integrated within the already existent knowledge (the common encyclopedic horizon of the audience), without abandoning the requirement of progressive informing, which, in turn, involves, in the cognitive rhetoric perspective, not only the "cognitive addition", by surpassing the limits of the common cognitive area, but also the new information, transmitted within the limits of shared knowledge. Nevertheless, Sperber and Cummings (2007:5) argue that this type of rhetoric should not be thoroughly restrictive; pertinence being perceived as one of the functions of shared knowledge:

*(...) any proposition of which some but not all of the entailments are part of shared knowledge is relevant. The wide field of relevance comprises all propositions that are relevant in this sense. It can thus be described as the potential complement of shared knowledge, and any modification in shared knowledge will bring about a modification in its complement. (...) This definition of relevance is clearly too broad. Shared knowledge, at any given moment, is not a homogeneous whole. Relevance is a function of shared knowledge and thus of memory.*

Pertinence and informativity are interrelated aspects having various consequences but they are mainly related to the process of production and not to the defense of the text.

## 8. CONCLUSIONS

The meta-discursive perspective related to one's own intended discourse may be a useful exercise in the minute designing of scientific contents and in considering the adjacent requirements of discursive rationality. A fore-positioning in the discursive field, by defining the "discourse" variable in the sight of the act's particularity and of the intended content, by indentifying the type of discourse , the enunciator's position, the adequate methods and strategies, is useful in the ultimate attempt of building discourse. Thus, an organization of the text and an achievement of discursive constraints take place in an anticipated manner. Yet, the construct design is incomplete in the absence of a projection similar to a simulation of accomplishment manner of discursive rationality requirements: coherence and cohesion, informativity and relevance/ pertinence. Bringing up the possibility of designing a doctoral thesis in relation with the above mentioned variables and indicators should not be confused for a meta-discursive and self-reflexive steadiness inside the project, but it should stand for prefiguring an endeavor that is about to be undertaken.

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