

THE ANALYSIS OF MARRIAGE VOWS WITHIN THE ASPECTS OF DISCOURSE

This paper uses the concept of *discourse* to define marriage vows. The primary issue of this work is to display the relation between discourse about marriage vows and marriage vows as discourse. We shall consider what sorts of aspect *discourse* has and how they work with marriage and marriage vows, by associating with Parker's ten conditions that support his definition of *discourse* (Parker 1992:3-22).¹ To his thinking, it is a system of statements which constructs an object.

Discourses do not simply describe the social world, but categorize it, they bring phenomena into sight. A strong form of the argument would be that discourses allow us to see things that are not 'really' there, and that once an object has been elaborated in a discourse it is difficult *not* to refer to it as if it were real. Discourses provide frameworks for debating the value of one way of talking about reality over other ways. Types of person are also referred to as the objects of the discourses. Looking at discourses in their historical context we understand that they are quite coherent, and in everyday life they become more carefully systematized being elaborated by academics.

Hence, we shall see the relation between discourse about marriage vows and marriage vows as discourse hereinafter. We shall consider what sorts of aspect *discourse* has and how they work with marriage and marriage vows, by associating with Parker's ten conditions that support his definition of *discourse*.

The underlying seven criteria deal with different levels of discourse analysis.

1. A discourse in realized in texts. Discourse appears not only within 'linguistic' phenomena such as speaking and writing, but also within 'non-linguistic' phenomena such as visual images. 'Text' is meaningful to us. Texts are delimited tissues of meaning reproduced in *any* form that can be given an interpretative gloss (Parker *ibid* p.6). Let's take an example of a *custom* vow; a kind of vow, which is considered to be a verbal 'love letter' from one person to the other. "*From this day on, I choose you, my beloved (name), to be my (husband/wife). To live with you and laugh with you; to stand by your side, and sleep in your arms; to be joy to your heart, and food for your soul; to bring out*

¹ Ian Parker, carrying out researches on discourse analysis in social and individual psychology, has a realist view on *discourse*. He defines discourse as a system of statements, which constructs an object, and claims that this definition requires to be supported by ten conditions. Parker sets out seven main, and three auxiliary criteria: main criteria are necessary and sufficient conditions for marking out some particular discourses, whereas auxiliary criteria are further aspect of discourse which discourse analysis should focus upon.

the best in you always, and for you, to be the most that I can. I promise to laugh with you in good times, to struggle with you in bad; to solace you when you are downhearted; to wipe your tears with my hands; to comfort you with my body; to mirror you with my soul; to share with you all my riches and honors; to play with you as much as I can until we grow old; and, still loving each other sweetly and gladly, our lives shall come to an end." This is a text; a tissue of holistic meaning inhabited in discourse. All of the world, when it has become a world understood by us and so given meaning by us, can be described as being textual. Once the process of interpretation and reflection has been started, we can adopt the poststructuralist principle '*there is nothing outside the text*'. There are many forms of text such as 'speech, writing, non-verbal behaviour, Morse code, semaphore, runes, advertisements, fashion systems, stained glass, architecture, bus tickets' (Parker *ibid* p.7). For example, making his/her marriage ceremony unique one may tell his/her personal story; sharing the story of meeting, falling in love, having the first date, proposing, saying the first words to each other.

2. A discourse is about objects. Discourse Analysis necessarily entails some degree of objectification, and necessarily involved with 'two layers of objectification; one is the layer of reality objectified by the discourse and the other is the layer of discourse objectified by the discourse itself. According to Foucault, discourses are practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak (Foucault 1972:49). The object of a marriage vow is matrimony, and the ceremony of making a solemn wedding vow is the text which reproduces the object in particular ways: a) the ceremony of making a nuptials pledge is a description of unification of a male and a female, so we can identify it a marriage discourse, b) we know that the couple must have children, so we have a familialist discourse, c) we understand the message located in the vow, located in the discourse of love, devotion and care. A text speaking about one object says that there is another object which is the set of statements about matrimony. '*A discourse is about object, and discourse analysis is about discourses as objects*'.

3. A discourse contains subjects. The object that a discourse refers to may have an independent reality outside discourse, but is given another reality by discourse (Parker *ibid* p.9). Discourse, therefore, involves with subjects, - i.e. what type of person reproduces discourse by speaking, writing, reading and listening to texts. This is related with Fairclough's analytical category called *style* - i.e. a way in which we identify ourselves semantically (Fairclough 1989). Discourse is a way in which one perceives and articulates one's own role. In marriage vow practices we perceive, articulate and identify ourselves as sweethearts, friends, promise-makers, vow pledgers, admirers, praisers, protectors, helpers by producing certain performative utterances, such as *I promise, I pledge, I vow, I love, I cherish, I marry, I wed, I admire, I praise, I protect, I help*. Without these discourses we cannot identify our own role in this relationship.

4. A discourse is a coherent system of meaning. The statements in a

discourse explicitly can be grouped, and given a certain coherence, in so far as they refer to the same topic (Parker *ibid* p.11). It was the particular search for the (purely) **constative** (utterances which describe something outside the text and can therefore be judged true or false), which prompted Austin to direct his attention to the distinction with so-called **performatives**. i.e. utterances which are neither true or false but which bring about a particular social effect by being uttered (Austin 1962). For example, 'With this ring I thee wed' - by speaking the utterance one performs the act. For a performative to have the desired effect, it has to meet certain social and cultural criteria, also called *felicity conditions*.⁶ Austin abandons the distinction between constatives and performatives and replaced it by a new distinction between three different 'aspects' of an utterance against the background of a generalized claim that all utterances are really performatives. This generalized claim is the key assumption of *speech act theory*: **a study of language as a form of action, that is, by making an utterance, language users perform one or more social acts**. These are called **speech acts**. The threefold distinction is that between different types of action:

1. locution - speaking the utterance
2. illocution - performing the social act of making a promise
3. perlocution - convincing your audience of your commitment

Locution: the male/female takes his/her oath by making some speech, illocution: the male/female puts the ring on the female's/male's ring finger by making the pledge, perlocution: the male/female displays that having made the utterance he/she has just made the female/male his wife/husband and settled down to married life.

5. A discourse refers to other discourses. Discourses embed, entail and presuppose other discourses to the extent that the contradictions *within* a discourse open up questions about what other discourses are at work (Parker *ibid* p.13). *Discourse*, on the one hand, delimits us to make statements within a certain *discourse*. But *discourse*, on the other hand, provides us the space for making new statements between discourses. There are some cases that a certain kind of *discourse* is used to describe another kind of *discourse* even though it is unreasonable, or has contradictions. For example, *market rhetoric* can appear in many non-economic spaces such as marriage: getting married is often described in Japan as if it were men's shopping of women. There is even a joke comparing the woman to a Christmas cake: the woman should be 'sold' before the 25th, otherwise she would be 'worthless' and 'remain unsold'.

6. A discourse reflects on its way of speaking. Although we are not always self-conscious about our language, we often choose certain terms or expressions that are appropriate for context. Besides, our speech is formed of neatly chosen terms or expressions that may cause good feedback from context. The wedding

⁶ felicity conditions – appropriate conditions

celebration, like any other sphere of social life, may be a source of misunderstanding. This is because our age faces a great deal of interfaith and intercultural marriages. Being carriers of diverse cultures and thinking and most important religion, it becomes rather difficult for the couple to make a final decision concerning the ritual ceremony. Here come the personal vows and their exchange to help the bride and groom to overcome the obstacle. They think that the right words chosen by them to display their love and devotion will be a great help to weaken the conflict issues. And this is one of the causes why some couples see difficulties in writing or preparing their wedding vows. Moreover, the distinctive blend of words, uttered in marriage vows, reflect the couple's unique partnership. They arouse a serious sense of responsibility and care. So, our wedding vows capture the essence of our wedding and our love of our future spouse.

7. A discourse is historically located. Discourse is not static, but dynamic and changing. When we think about discourses as consisting of a system of statements we seem to be making an appeal to the 'synchronic' dimension of language inspired by structural linguistics (Saussure (1916) 1974). However, just as post-structuralism moved beyond the distinction between a system (the synchronic) and the development of individual terms (the diachronic), so discourse analysis cannot take place without locating its object in time. Let us look at a case that shows that discourse is located in history. The definitions of marriage have also been part of the definitions of citizenship. People are made part of the community based in part on whether they adhere to the 'correct' model of marriage - not just in that marriage should be monogamous but also in that it should be between the 'correct' races that men and women stick to the 'correct' familial roles, etc. A good example of this was how women's citizenship was stripped if they married foreigners while foreign women became citizens when marrying American men. The movement for women's political rights was flourishing by 1907. Women could vote in four states, and eight years later when the U.S. Supreme Court reviewed the policy on wife's citizenship, woman suffragists' gains had advanced further. In California, when women got the ballot in 1911, Ethel Mackenzie was prevented from registering because she was married to an Englishman. Mackenzie took the issue to court, contending that it was unconstitutional for Congress to deprive her of her rights as a citizen because of her marriage. No court sympathized with Mackenzie, neither the trial court, nor California's highest court or the highest court in the land. The U.S. Supreme Court, unanimously endorsing the 1907 provision (stripping the citizenship of American women married to foreigners) admitted the 'ancient principle' of the 'identity of husband and wife'. A married couple's 'intimate relation and unity of interests' made it 'of public concern in many instances to merge their identity and give dominance to the husband'. This is why marriage is also a matter of civil rights: when particular people are excluded from the legal institution of marriage, they are also de facto excluded from equal participation

in the social order. This shows that discourse is with a story about its referent that was to be discovered in the past. 'Discourses are located in time, in history, for the objects they refer to are objects constituted in the past by the discourse. A discourse refers to past references to those objects' (Parker *ibid* p.16).

Although the seven criteria outlined are necessary and sufficient for marking out particular discourses, three more aspects of discourse should be also focused on. They are concerned with institutions, power and ideology.

8. Discourses support institutions. The employment of a discourse is often a practice which reproduces the material basis of the institution, and the most interesting discourses are those which are implicated in some way with the structure of institutions. The marriage discourse, for example, appears in books on matrimony, in pamphlets published specially for couples to choose a vow speech before their wedlock, in specialized journals, in lectures delivered on the history of marriage, as well as in the speech spoken by a bride or groom during the church ceremony. In such cases the employment of a discourse is often a practice which reproduces the material basis of the institution. Giving the answer 'I do' to the priest's question '*Do you, (name), take (name), to be your (husband/wife)?*', making an individual marriage vow, joining of hands, the interchange of rings, giving a kiss are all *discursive practices*. Such practices acquire meaning, as they have the status of a text. This comes to prove that both speaking and writing are a practice. Marriage vows are marked both by ethnic, cultural or religious backgrounds and individual reference. The qualitative distinction between marriage vows lies in the vocabulary. Each wedding vow is characterized by the special vocabulary only typical of it. Every human being, finding himself at the door of marriage, should know how important it is to write an ideal wedding vow for his/her wife/husband. They must make sure that their wedding vows are as wonderful as their spouse is.

9. Discourse reproduces power relations. 'We should talk about discourse and power in the same breath. Institutions, for example, are structured around and reproduce power relations.' (Parker *ibid* p.18) Writing a wedding vow is the best way to display the extremely important aspect of the married life: passion, intimacy, commitment, devotion. A marriage vow is a discourse reproducing power relations. It displays what we feel and want to feel all our lives, how we treat each other and how we would like to be treated, and the most important what we value, how we value and how we treat what we value. The category fully defining a wedding vow is **evaluation**. So, a marriage vow as a type of formulaic discourse is the evaluation of the bride's feelings and attitudes towards each other, in other words, a way in which we put value to our marital life semantically.

10. Discourses have ideological effects. Here, ideology means a distorted reflection between thought and reality: it is an imaginary or presupposed representation of reality and its transformation into reality. The qualitative

difference of two commodities, in our case, wedding vows (reality) is transformed into the quantitative difference (thought). The value relation (thought) is established in head or in speech, when the couples begin to engage in exchange of two marriage vows (reality).

Thus, as we have seen, discourse works with marriage vows in various ways. Any kind of wedding vow, being a type of formulaic discourse, is considered to be a text presenting a 'personal story'. A wedding vow is a discourse about the couple's feelings and desires. The subjects involved in the discourse of marriage vows can only be the bride and groom, who perform as friends, lovers, partners, guards, soulmates, etc. A marriage vow is a combination of three speech acts: locution - taking an oath; illocution - putting the ring on the female's/male's ring finger by making the pledge; perlocution - settling down to married life. The discourse of marriage vows doesn't exist apart from other discourses. The *market rhetoric* discourse in a non-economic space like marriage is the poof of one discourse referring to another one. The word stock forming a marriage vow reflects the way of its speaking. The big number of interfaith and intercultural marriages results in the choice of diversified vocabulary. History creates wedding vows making them a constituent part of marriage. And they undergo changes not only depending on the individual as a human being, but also her/his beliefs and convictions. The large number of wedding vows and the big wish of the couple to make this solemn promise to each other cause the creation of a serious institution, that is, marriage and marriage vows. A marriage vow is an evaluation of feelings, attitudes, beliefs and convictions semantically. And at last, a marriage vow is a combination of an uttered speech, as a piece of reality, and a series of thoughts, as a piece of ideology.

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