

Mediated Discourse Analysis: An Investigation into Noe-rooz Discourse Traditions in Iranian Culture

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Abstract

Inspired mainly by Scollon's models of mediated discourse analysis, the present study is to analyze Noe-rooz (New Year) discourse traditions in Iranian culture. Mediated discourse analysis (MDA), a hybrid ethnographic/sociolinguistic approach rooted in cultural-historical activity and practice theories, analyzes mediated actions with objects and mediational means. The focus of this study is on what Iranians do at the beginning of the New Year including their verbal language; specific sentences as prayers for the time of transition to the New Year and their actions of preparing a specific spread called *Haft Seen* as well as the tradition of visiting relatives and friends. The purpose here is not to merely discuss such sentences (prayers) and other tools of Noe-rooz traditions in Iran, but the combination of discourse with social practices, all which have become sociocultural norms for Iranian people. This study also analyzes the discourse and action of visiting relatives and friends through Scollon's (2005) model of cycles. The present investigation makes it explicit that if we go deep into a special moment of actions and traditions, e.g. the New Year and its subsequent discourse and actions in Iran, the role of culture and beliefs of a nation will emerge.

Keywords: mediated discourse analysis, cultural tools, mediated action, Noe-rooz traditions, practice

INTRODUCTION

The principles of Mediated Discourse Analysis (MDA) were first introduced by Scollon in the late 1990s (Scollon, 1997, 1998). It is an approach for analyzing discourse in which the unit of analysis is the mediated action. The concept of mediated action was proposed by Wertsch (1991) and is principally based on Vygotskyian psychology. According to Wertsch (1998), a mediated action highlights two elements: the agent and the mediational means. A mediated action is never carried out by the agent alone; it rather is only possible if both the actor and the mediated means are present.

Scollon (1998) utilized the notion of mediated action and pointed out that the focus of analysis, according to MDA, is on social actors, the mediated means as well as the action itself which contains a 'hierarchy of simultaneously occurring practices' which refer to 'action in the world'. Scollon considered individuals as social actors and the society with its components as mediational means but neither social actors nor society are enough separately, rather what is important is the point at which they intersect with each other. For MDA, discourse does mean language in use; it is neither language 'in general' nor language as an abstract concept. Language, in this respect, contains a 'particular word, sentence, phrase, intonation, or even a genre that is adopted and changed by a social actor to accomplish a specific action at a specific place and in a concrete moment' (Norris and Jones, 2005). Accordingly, discourse is neither the action nor the language per se, but a bit of language at the moment of taking an action.

This approach to discourse analysis sees discourse as one of "many available tools with which people take action either along with discourse or separate from it" (Scollon, 2001 a). The focus of mediated discourse analysis is not discourse per se, but the whole intersection of social practices of which discourse is a part. It refuses to see language use as the sole means by which actions are taken (Scollon and Scollon, 2003). MDA 'explores how discourse becomes a tool for claims and imputations of social identity' and provides a way of understanding how all of the objects and all of the language as well as all of the actions that people do with these mediational means 'intersect at a nexus of multiple social practices and the paths of multiple histories and storylines that reproduce social groups' (Norris et al, 2005). Accordingly, it is not always possible to "read" social actions from discourse; MDA approaches discourse through the action. It focuses on the actions that are being taken with and mediated through the tools. This approach to discourse analysis broadens the 'circumference' of discourse analysis to include other elements of life like objects, gestures, non-verbal sounds and built environment (Scollon, 2001 b).

MDA also maintains that actions should be analyzed with respect to their layers; 'actions are rhythmically entrained to at least six different (but integrated) pacemakers' (Scollon, 2005), which is a step by step analysis of action and discourse. Scollon states that all mediated actions occur simultaneously on different 'timescales', each with its own 'rhythm' and analysts should take into account this 'layered simultaneity' in order to understand the actions completely (Blommaert, 2004). Unlike this micro analysis, MDA has another perspective toward discourse analysis, i.e. looking at action as a social practice. Wertsch (1998) uses the term 'practice' for mediated actions when they are instances in a chain of actions that have a history within a particular group of social actors. Scollon (2002 b) defines a practice as a historical accumulation within the "habitus/historical body" (Bourdieu, 1997; Nishida, 1958) of social actors of mediated actions taken over his /her life.

The present study focuses on the New Year tradition in Iran from the angle of Mediated Discourse Analysis. Actions taking place in this tradition are mediated through a variety of tools including *Haft Seen* spread and its components, the prayers that people whisper

at the time of Transition to the New Year, different flowers specific to that time and many other things. It should be noted that the customs mentioned below are the current ones which Iranian Muslims have accepted and acted upon since early Islam. There have however been other traditions popular in Iran before Islam, which are not the focus of the present study.

This study further investigates a specific action in the above-mentioned tradition, i.e. visiting relatives and friends, and analyses its cycles according to the model introduced by Scollon (2005). Furthermore, traditional ceremonies of the New Year among Muslim Iranians are seen in this study as social practices which reveal how discourse and identity are involved in 'situated social actions' (Scollon, 2001 b) since they are rooted in culture and history of Iranian people.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

One of the properties of Mediated Discourse Analysis differentiating it from other approaches to Discourse analysis is its view toward context. Unlike other approaches, MDA does not consider context a useful element for addressing the complex relationship of discourse to society. Scollon (2001 a) indeed separates MDA from those approaches which see 'contextual information' solely as 'external set of background determination':

Many theories of language and of discourse start out with a focus on 'social action' such as speech act theory, pragmatics, interactional sociolinguistics, and CDA but then somehow in practice tend to become focused only on texts. Other aspects of social action and other meditational means than language and discourse are backgrounded as 'context'. Unfortunately, this can lead to a distorted understanding of the relationship between discourse and social action. (Scollon, 2001 a: 4)

Consequently, MDA presents another perspective for the relationship of discourse, action, context and tools. As discussed earlier, the unit of analysis in MDA is the mediated action. This focus comes primarily from the works of American psychologist James Wertsch and his colleagues (Penuel and Wertsch, 1995; Wertsch, 1991, 1994, 1995, 1997, 1998; Wertsch et al., 1995) who in turn take it from the work of Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1978, 1987).

Wertsch and his colleagues call their perspective 'the sociocultural approach to mind'. This concept is also achieved from the works of Bruner (1990), Cole (1990), and Lantolf (2000). 'The sociocultural approach to mind' emphasizes that all actions are mediated through 'cultural tools' (Wertsch, 1998) which include objects, technologies, practices, identities, social institutions, communities, and also language as well as other semiotic systems. All of these tools accompany history of a nation that has determined what can be done with them and what cannot: that is, these kinds of tools specify certain affordances and constrains. This is what makes difference between nations and their customs; when actors of a society appropriate these affordances and constrains into

their habitus (Bourdieu, 1997) and utilize them purposefully in social situations. Understanding social life involves not only the available tools for mediated actions, the intentions, goals, plans or habits of social actors, but also the appropriate understanding of the 'tension between the mediational means as provided in sociocultural setting and unique contextualized use of these means in carrying out particular concrete actions' (Wertsch, 1994: 205).

The most important and differentiating component among these mediating tools are what Wertsch calls voices: the words, phrases, narratives, and 'ways of speaking' (Gumperz and Hymes, 1986) that people borrow from the sociocultural environment to interact with others and construct their own accounts of these interactions. According to Wertsch, all actions are mediated through voices, even apparently silent actions, as even private thought involves language (Vygotsky, 1987) and private behavior which contains social learning. In this respect, Mediated Discourse Analysis has utilized a number of concepts mostly originated from psychology and sociolinguistics and has integrated them with several traditions of linguistics with a focus on how discourse can account for 'its complex role in situated social action' (Norris and Jones, 2005).

Another framework utilized for analyzing discourse in MDA is the one which investigates how actions and discourse move through time. It focuses on the various rhythmic patterns that restrict mediated actions and aims at revealing 'how locally negotiated actions are embodied in long-term timescales that link actors, objects, language, and practice both with history and with future states' (Scollon, 2002, b). In this respect, the 'historical trajectories' are not seen as 'contextual or peripheral information' but necessary element for analyzing discourse in action (Norris and Jones, 2005).

THE STUDY

Noe-Rooz (also spelled as Norooz) is the Iranian New Year festival which celebrates the coming of spring by Iranian nations. (When referring to Iranian nations, we include nations that have a common foundation, history, and language). In Persian language "Noe" means "new", and "Rooz" means "day". Hence, "Noe-Rooz" means "new day". Noe-Rooz occurs at the exact time of the Vernal (spring) Equinox, when the length of night and day are equal. Translated literally, Equinox means "Equal Night". Because the sun is positioned above the equator, day and night are about equal in length all over the world during the equinoxes. In parallel with the rebirth of nature, extensive spring-cleaning is a national tradition observed in almost every household in Iran. This is also extended to every person's attire, and it is customary to buy at least one set of new clothes.

One of the traditions for the beginning of the New Year in Iranian culture is setting a table or spread with an arrangement of several items of which seven of them should start with the Persian letter 'Seen' (in English S). The Persian translation for the number seven is "*Haft*"; hence, "*Haft Seen*" means "Seven S's". It is customary for the family to gather round the Haft Seen spread a few hours before the New Year and recite poems

from Hafez and verses from the Holy Quran as well as prayers of the Transition usually along these lines:

“O Reformer of hearts and minds, O Manager of day and night and Transformer of conditions, change ours to the best in accordance with your will”.

The family indeed begins the New Year with a prayer for health, happiness and prosperity, and asking God for transition into the best manner. At the exact moment of the New Year, the oldest person in the family continues the traditions by hugging and wishing each member well and offering sweets, pastries, and coins. Banknotes are sometimes placed between the pages of the Holy Quran to bless them before they are given to the younger members of the family.

The contemporary *Haft Seen* spread includes the following items seven of which must necessarily start with the letter Seen(S) in Persian:

- Sabzeh - wheat or lentils grown in a tray or dish prior to Noe-Rooz to represent rebirth
- Samanu - a sweet pudding made from wheat germ, symbolizing affluence
- Senjed - the dried fruit of the lotus tree which represents love
- Seer - garlic in English, representing medicine
- Seeb - apple in English, representing beauty and health
- Somaq - sumac berries, which represent the color of the sun rise
- Serkeh - vinegar in English, which represents age and patience
- Sonbol - the hyacinth flower with its strong fragrance heralding the coming of spring
- Sekkeh - coins representing prosperity and wealth.
- Mirror - representing the reflections of creation on the first day of spring
- Painted eggs - representing fertility
- A bowl with goldfish - representing life

On the New Year's Day, families dress in their new clothes and start the twelve-day celebrations by visiting the elders of their family, then the rest of their family and finally their friends. On the thirteenth day, they leave their homes for picnic outdoors.

From Mediated Discourse Analysis perspective, the New Year customs in Iran includes a variety of tools including the prayers of Iranian people at the beginning of their New Year revealing Iranians' hope for change, happiness, health, and prosperity in the forthcoming year. These prayers accompany what they had done before the Transition time including cleaning their houses, buying new clothing as well as preparing *Haft Seen* with its symbolic components. These sociocultural practices take inspiration from nature in that the change in seasons initiates this new Resurrection in human life. It is noticeable that all items of Haft Seen can also be found at other times and in other regions of the world but it is at the beginning of the spring and in these Asian countries that they correspond to a nation's culture. The combination of these tools (*Haft Seen* symbols) at this moment in time connects its social actors in a 'nexus of practice' which result in a specific discourse (the prayers, congratulations, wishes, etc) and consequent

action of visiting each other and invigorating body and soul when trees are waking up from their long lasted sleep.

The objects in analyzing the Noe-Rooz discourse are the components of *Haft Seen* spread accompanied by the language specific to that time of the year- i.e. prayer for the Transition and congratulations for the beginning of the New Year- as well as the what people do before the Transition, e.g. cleaning the houses and preparing themselves for the Spring, as well as after the Transition, i.e. visiting elders, relatives and friends and going to nature to refresh soul as well as body. A combination of these actions shows the culture and identity of Iranian people. Prayers of people at the beginning of the New Year are used as tools to take one or more social actions and to claim and 'impute' 'certain social identities'; their concern for the change in the nature, their belief in God as the creator of the world, and asking Him a new beginning for the upcoming year. Through uttering such prayers, Iranian people go beyond just asking God for a transformation to better situation and manner. The prayers actually connect these people in a 'complex nexus of practice' in the discourse of Iranian culture which refers to their history (Scollon, 2001 b). They originate from Muslims' belief in the Resurrection and hereafter, and in God as the only creator and designer of them all.

Approaching discourse analysis from MDA perspective, the present study does not consider the atmosphere of Iranian houses at that time of the year as a traditional context and the sentences uttered by people (prayers and congratulations) as the traditional texts. It instead shifts its focus to actions that are taken with these tools- whether they are Golden fish, mirror or spoken language of people. In fact, what is important here is the focus on action as unit of analysis, specially the mediated action in that the intersection of context and text result in ceremonies mainly specific to Iran and, to some extent, shared by some Asian countries. The first days of spring are the real moments when mediated means, social actors, and sociocultural environment interact with each other (Norris and Jones, 2005). The actions which take place at this time, e.g. cleaning the house before the beginning of the New Year, reading the Quran or the New Year prayers, are the point at which Iranians, as social actors, intersect with *Haft Seen* components, as mediated tools. Iranians act socially not only before the Transition to the New Year but also after it. Their major role begins indeed when the old year turns into a new one; they visit each other, congratulate their relatives and friends and wish them the best.

Another phase of this study focuses on the tradition of visiting elderly people, relatives and friends approached as an action with different cycles. The model used for analyzing the discourse and action of visiting and its cycles is taken from Scollon according to whom actions are 'rhythmically entrained to at least six different (but integrated) pace-makers', '*Zeitgeber*' (Scollon 2005: 24). This model contends that any action is the intersection of these 6 cycles and the periodical nature of each cycle causes limitations for the actions that can be taken within each one. Mediated Discourse Analysis examines the full range of rhythmic cycles within which an action is integrated. They include:

1. Cardiac-respiratory cycle: pulsation of the heart and of breathing

2. Metabolic cycle: ingestion, digestion, elimination, pain cycles, drowsiness cycles
3. Circadian cycle: 24-hour revolution of the earth about its axis
4. Lunar cycle: 28-day revolution of the moon about the earth
5. Solar cycle: 365-day revolution of the earth about the sun
6. Entropic cycle: formation and decay of material substances

The first cycle includes the biological functions of human body which have rhythm. Speaking, eating, laughing, walking and lifting in the action of visiting relatives and friends in Noe-Rooz celebrations have this cardiac-respiratory system. The second cycle, metabolic, is restricted by needs of eating and digestion or how long we can continue a physical or mental effort. Conversations of people in the feasts and their meals center round this cycle which can last a few hours. The next three cycles are called 'geosemiotic' by Scollon; i.e. relating to the earth and its relationships to the moon and the sun. The action of visiting itself falls within the circadian cycle in the 24 hour of every day. In fact, people's schedule for attending the feasts should be compatible to the appropriate time of the day; the lunch and the dinner time and their sleep time. The action of visiting cannot happen from night to morning for its sleeping time.

For the fourth cycle, these ceremonies do not depend on the 28-day revolution of the moon about the earth but if they occur simultaneously with specific months of the year according to Muslims' lunar calendar, some of their activities will be restricted. For instance, when the Noe-Rooz holidays encounter with the month of Muslims mourning for the martyrdom of their Prophets' grandson- the month of Moharram, Muslims restrict their feasts or use the congratulations of the New Year very seldom. Another intersection of lunar and solar cycles is when Noe-Rooz co-occurs with the fasting month of Muslims-Ramadan- in that the feasts will be postponed to evening, after breaking the fasts or if they are held during the day, eating will be avoided except for children. In the case that cycle 4 and cycle 5 intersect, the lunar cycle is preferred over the solar cycle because for Iranians Islam overrides nationality.

Cycle five relates to the annual cycles of seasons which are indeed the basis of Iranian New Year traditions and the most dominant one. As mentioned earlier, Noe-Rooz occurs at the exact time of the Vernal (spring) Equinox, when the length of night and day are equal. The first few days of these ceremonies is devoted to visiting grandparents, parents, old relatives and close ones, then others and families. The action of visiting which is the focus of this study should occur at this time of the year and according to this cycle.

The entropic cycle, the last one, refers both to the material tools with which we perform the action of visiting, such as clothes of people, chairs, tables, carpets, etc, and our physical capacities, i.e. our fatigue and shortage of energy to continue visiting in a day. Other elements which are a part of the New Year atmosphere in Iranian houses include flowers like tulip and jacinth available only in spring.

Exploring the discourse related to these cycles and ceremonies of the Noe-Rooz in Iran, discloses the fact that the Transition to the New Year and its consequent ceremonies

make Iranians use special sentences and words (e.g. New Year prayers and congratulations, as well as good wishes for each other). Another discourse which determines people's actions is their announcement of the time that they are at home expecting guests. This announcement is specific to this time of the year; in fact there is no formal invitation, like what happens for a wedding or a birthday party, but just a declaration which calls for visitors and relatives to come. It is these announcements and phone calls which determine and restrict people's consequent actions and the related discourse. This is a norm with which all Iranians are familiar and which shows how discourse at any moment of an action determines subsequent actions outside the ongoing moment of interaction. Accordingly, discourse permeates our action at all levels in the form of what Iedema calls 'resemiotization' (Iedema, 2003), Bernstein (1990) refers to as 'recontextualization' and Silverstein and Urbans (1996) name 'entextualization'. Vygotskians also refer to it as 'internalization' (Scollon and Scollon, 2004). The point is that the conversations at every moment of the New Year actions need their own words, phrases, technical terms, and ideas necessary as cultural tools.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

MDA provides analytic tools for investigating non-verbal actions as constitutive elements in social practices that are vital in socio-cultural terms. 'Physical actions with objects can indicate how people are – or are not – taking up expectations for tool use and identities as tool users' (Wohlwend, 2009). Mediated activity, verbal and non-verbal, occurs in a social space situated in a particular time and place. 'A place is constituted not only by the built structures, furniture, and decorative objects but also by the discourses present in that place' (Scollon and Scollon, 2003:162).

The present study focused on Iranian people's traditions for the beginning of the New Year including what they say as prayers at the beginning of their New Year, i.e. asking God for transition of their life into the best, as well as their action of preparing a specific spread called *Haft Seen*. The purpose here was not to merely discuss such sentences (prayers) and other objects of the traditions, but the combination of discourse with social practices, all which have become sociocultural norms in Iran.

It should be noted that this kind of analyzing the discourse related to Iranian culture provides a path for understanding the intersection of "all of the objects, all parts of the language, and all of the actions" taken by people "at a nexus of multiple social practices" (Norris and Jones, 2005). This approach to analyzing discourse also highlights the "trajectory" of Iranian history and "the storylines that reproduce social identities and social groups" (Scollon, 2001 b). Scollon (1997) mentions that social actors construct, attribute, and accept or deny a social identity through every action that is performed. Social identity is embedded in cultural and social currents, constructed through social histories, and internalized by the individual as habitus (Bourdieu, 1977; Nishida, 1958). In this respect, MDA is concerned not only with identifying social practices but also with addressing participants' concerns (Wohlwend, 2009). As Scollon and Scollon (2001) note, 'all social actions make implicit or explicit claims to the social groups and positions of all participants – speakers, hearers, and those talked about or in front of' (p. 269).

Often, such actions are performed through the verbal mode, but as Norris has shown, such actions are just as often performed through other embodied modes like gaze, gesture or posture, and/or through disembodied modes such as print and layout and most importantly objects in a specific culture (2002a, 2002b, 2004a, 2004b, 2005, 2007).

This study also analyzed the discourse and action of visiting relatives and friend through Scollon's (2005) model of cycles. This model was a micro-analysis of a traditional action within culture of a society for particular time of the year. These cycles link to macro-analysis of Discourses that intersect and form real actions (Wohlwend, 2009). According to Scollon (2001) combining MDA with critical discourse analysis links micro-analysis of talk and text to global discourses that circulate in local situations which illustrate particulars identities. Identity is constantly interactively constructed on a micro-level, where an individual's identity is claimed, contested and re-constructed in interaction and in relation to the other participants (Scollon, 1997; Scollon and Scollon, 2001).

Accordingly, the concept of social identity evident through the traditions of Noe-rooz and social practices undertaken by Iranian people for their New Year ceremonies were the focus of the present study. The prayers specific to the Transition to the New Year uttered by Iranians at the beginning of their New Year indicates Iranians' hope for change, happiness, health, and prosperity in the forthcoming year and believing in God as the only reliable source of power. These prayers are followed by what Iranians had done before the Transition time including cleaning their houses, buying new clothing as well as preparing *Haft Seen* with its symbolic components. These sociocultural practices are inspired by what happens to nature in that season of the year, i.e. the change in seasons initiates this new Resurrection in human life. The combination of these tools (*Haft Seen* symbols) at this moment in time connects its social actors (Iranians) in a 'nexus of practice' which result in a specific discourse (the prayers, congratulations, wishes, etc) and consequent action of visiting each other leading to the beginning of a restarted life.

In this research combined MDA with James Paul Gee's (2005) approach to critical discourse analysis. Gee theorizes embodied (D)iscourse as expected ways of being and doing, a notion that resonates with the Bourdieu (1977) notions of social practice and habitus that are the foundations of MDA. 'This approach to MDA provided fine-grained analysis of gesture, material manipulation, non-verbal and verbal language that uncovered the meaning-making inherent in play practices and the global identities' of a society (Wohlwend, 2009).

A final word is that all moments and actions are dynamic. Discourse (language) may be the action itself, may complement action, may follow or precede it (Scollon, 2005). Action and the discourse related to it is never a 'still pond'. This study made it explicit that if we go deep into a special moment, i.e. the New Year and its subsequent discourse and actions, the role of culture and beliefs of a nation will emerge. This is the real meaning of 'social practices'. Actually, through this historical and cultural knowledge we

can use the appropriate norms and discourse of a country. The customs of Iranians are social practices since they are rooted in their culture and show the role of nature in their lives. The findings of this study also revealed that adopting action as unit of analysis makes us focus on the discourse through the action and as one of the available tools for analyzing it; so texts and contexts are no longer the target of discourse analysts but they are within that unit of analysis. The pedagogical implication of this study is for those who want to get familiar with another language in that they should not only know the language itself, but also the social actions and practices of the target society, especially those rooted in the target language culture and the discourse specific to its customs and traditions.

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