

Discourse Analysis

The word discourse is usually defined as “language beyond the sentence” and so the analysis of discourse is typically concerned with the study of language in texts and conversation. In many of the preceding chapters, when we were concentrating on linguistic description, we were concerned with the accurate representation of the forms and structures. However, as language-users, we are capable of more than simply recognizing correct versus incorrect forms and structures. We can cope with fragments in newspaper headlines such as **Trains collide, two die**, and know that what happened in the first part was the cause of what happened in the second part. We can also make sense of notices like **No shoes, no service**, on shop windows in summer, understanding that a conditional relation exists between the two parts (“**If you are wearing no shoes, you will receive no service**”).

We have the ability to create complex discourse interpretations of fragmentary linguistic messages. Interpreting discourse We can even cope with texts, written in English, which we couldn’t produce ourselves and which appear to break a lot of the rules of the English language. Yet we can build an interpretation. The following example, provided by Eric Nelson, is from an essay by a student learning English and contains ungrammatical forms and misspellings, yet it can be understood.

My Town My natal was in a small town, very close to Riyadh capital of Saudi Arabia. The distant between my town and Riyadh 7 miles exactly. The name of this Almasani that means in English Factories. It takes this name from the peopl’s carrer. In my childhood I remmeber the people live. It was very simple. Most the people was farmer.

This example may serve to illustrate a simple point about the way we react to language that contains **ungrammatical forms**. Rather than simply rejecting the text as ungrammatical, we try to make sense of it. That is, we attempt to arrive at a reasonable interpretation of what the writer intended to convey.

(Most people say they understand the “My Town” text quite easily.) It is this effort to interpret (or to be interpreted), and how we accomplish it, that are the key elements investigated in the study of discourse. To arrive at an interpretation, and to make our messages interpretable, we certainly rely on what we know about linguistic form and structure. But, as language-users, we have more knowledge than that.

Cohesion

We know, for example, that texts must have a certain structure that depends on factors quite different from those required in the structure of a single sentence. Some of those factors are described in terms of cohesion, or **the formal ties and connections that exist within texts.** There are several cohesive ties in this text.

My father once bought a Lincoln convertible. He did it by saving every penny he could. That car would be worth a fortune nowadays. However, he sold it to help pay for my college education. Sometimes I think I’d rather have the convertible.

We can identify connections here in the use of words to maintain reference to the same people and things throughout. There are also connections created by terms that share a common element of meaning, such as “money” and “time.” The verb tenses in the first four sentences are in the past, creating a connection between those events, in contrast to the present tense of the final sentence marking a change in time and focus.

However, by itself, cohesion is not sufficient to enable us to make sense of what we read. It is quite easy to create a text that has a lot of cohesive ties, but is difficult to interpret. Note that the following text has these connections in Lincoln – the car, red – that color, her –she and letters – a letter.

My father bought a Lincoln convertible. The car driven by the police was red. That color doesn't suit her. She consists of three letters. However, a letter isn't as fast as a telephone call.

It becomes clear from this type of example that the “connectedness” we experience in our interpretation of normal texts is not simply based on connections between words. There must be another factor that helps us distinguish connected texts that make sense from those that do not. This factor is usually described as “coherence.” Coherence The key to the concept of coherence (“everything fitting together well”) is not something that exists in the words or structures of discourse, like cohesion, but something that exists in people. It is people who “make sense” of what they read and hear. They try to arrive at an interpretation that is in line with their experience of the way the world is. You may have tried quite hard to make the last example fit some situation that accommodated all the details (involving a red car, a woman and a letter) into a single coherent interpretation. In doing so, you would necessarily be involved in a process of bringing other information to the text. This process is not restricted to trying to understand “odd” texts. It seems to be involved in our interpretation of all discourse. For example, you pick up a newspaper and see this headline: Woman robs bank with sandwich.

As you try to build a coherent interpretation, you probably focus on the sandwich part because there is something odd about this situation. Is she just carrying a sandwich, or is she eating the sandwich (taking occasional bites), or is she acting as if the sandwich is a weapon (concealed in a bag perhaps)? Deciding which interpretation is appropriate cannot be accomplished based on only the words in the headline. We need to bring information from our experience to create a plausible situation. If you decided on the “pretend gun in bag” situation, then your coherence-creating mind would appear to be in good working order. We also depend on coherence in coping with everyday conversation. We are continually taking part in conversational interactions where a great deal of what is meant or communicated cannot actually be found in what is said. In this brief interaction (from Widdowson, 1978), there are no cohesive ties connecting the three utterances, so we must be using

some other means to make sense of it. One way to understand what is going on is to consider the three parts of the interaction in terms of speech acts. These are listed on the right, providing a way of analyzing the interaction by identifying what makes it coherent for the participants.

H E R : That's the telephone. (She makes a request of him to perform action)

H I M : I'm in the bath. (He states reason why he cannot comply with request)

H E R : OK. (She accepts reason)

If this is a reasonable analysis of what took place in the brief interaction, then it is clear that language-users must have a lot of knowledge of how conversation works that is not simply knowledge of words and sentences, but must involve familiarity with a lot of other types of structures and their typical functions.

Conversation analysis In simple terms, English conversation can be described as an activity in which, for the most part, two or more people take turns at speaking. Typically, only one person speaks at a time and there tends to be an avoidance of silence between speaking turns. (This is not true in all situations or societies.) If more than one participant tries to talk at the same time, one of them usually stops, as in the following example, where A stops until B has finished.

A : Didn't you [know whB : [But he must've been there by two A : Yes but you knew where he was going (A small square bracket [is conventionally used to indicate a place where simultaneous or overlapping speech occurs.) For the most part, participants wait until one speaker indicates that he or she has finished, usually by signaling a completion point. Speakers can mark their turns as complete in a number of ways: by asking a question, for example, or by pausing at the end of a completed syntactic structure like a phrase or sentence. Other participants can indicate that they want to take the speaking turn, also in a number of ways. They can start to make short sounds, usually repeated, while the speaker is talking, and often use body shifts or facial expressions to signal that they have something to say. (For more on conversation, see Task C, on page 168.) **Turn-Taking** There are different expectations of conversational style and different strategies of participation

in conversation, which may result in slightly different conventions of turn-taking. One strategy, which may be overused by “long-winded” speakers or those who are used to “holding the floor,” is designed to avoid having normal completion points occur. We all use this strategy to some extent, usually in situations where we have to work out what we are trying to say while actually saying it. If the normal expectation is that completion points are marked by the end of a sentence and a pause, then one way to “keep the turn” is to avoid having those two markers occur together. That is, don’t pause at the end of sentences; make your sentences run on by using connectors like and, and then, so, but; place your pauses at points where the message is clearly incomplete; and preferably “fill” the pause with a hesitation marker such as er, em, uh, ah. Pauses and Filled Pauses In the following example, note how the pauses (marked by ...) are placed before and after verbs rather than at the end of sentences, making it difficult to get a clear sense of what this person is saying until we hear the part after each pause. A: that’s their favorite restaurant because they ... enjoy French food and when they were ... in France they couldn’t believe it that ... you know that they had ... that they had had better meals back home In the next example, speaker X produces filled pauses (with em, er, you know) after having almost lost the turn at his first brief hesitation. X : well that film really was ... [wasn’t what he was good at Y: [when diX : I mean his other ... em his later films were much more ... er really more in the romantic style and that was more what what he was ... you know ... em best at doing Y: so when did he make that one Adjacency Pairs That last example would seem to suggest that conversation is a problematic activity where speakers have to pay close attention to what is going on. That is not normally the case because a great deal of conversational interaction follows some fairly well established patterns. When someone says Hi or Hello, we usually respond with a similar greeting. This type of almost automatic sequence is called an adjacency pair, which consists of a first part and a second part, as found in greetings, question–answer (Q~A) sequences, thanking and leavetaking. First part
Second part

Y O U : Good mornin’.

M E : Good mornin’.

Y O U : Where's Mary?

M E : She's at work already.

Y O U : Thanks for your help yesterday.

M E : Oh, you're welcome.

Y O U : Okay, talk to you later.

M E : Bye.

These examples illustrate the basic pattern, but not all first parts are immediately followed by second parts. For example, one question may not receive its answer until after another question–answer sequence.

Insertion Sequences

In the following example, the sequence Q2~A2 comes between the first question (Q1) and its answer (A1). This is called an insertion sequence, that is, an adjacency pair that comes between the first and second parts of another pair.

Y O U : Do you want some milk? (= Q1)

M E : Is it soy milk? (= Q2)

Y O U : Of course. (= A2)

M E : Okay, thanks. (= A1)

In some situations, a complex structure can emerge from the effect of insertion sequences. This is often the case in “service encounters,” as in our next example. Notice how it is only in the middle of this interaction (Q3~A3) that we have an adjacency pair together, while insertion sequences delay the occurrence of second parts for each of the other first parts.

B U D : Can I order pizza to go? (= Q1) D A N : What kind would you like? (= Q2) B U D : Do you have any special deals? (= Q3) D A N : Well, you can get two veggie supremes for the price of one. (= A3) B U D : Okay, I'd like that deal. (= A2) D A N : Sure thing. We'll have that ready for you in no time. (= A1) We are not normally aware of most of these aspects of conversational

structure, but speakers sometimes draw attention to the need for a second part once a first part has been uttered. In the following interaction, originally analyzed by Sacks (1972: 341), a mother immediately notices the absence of a spoken return greeting by her daughter and draws attention to the social expectation involved.

W O M A N : Hi, Annie.

M O T H E R : Annie, don't you hear someone say hello to you?

W O M A N : Oh, that's okay, she smiled hello.

M O T H E R : You know you're supposed to greet someone, don't you?

A N N I E : [Hangs head] Hello. The expectations we all have that certain patterns of turn-taking will occur in conversation are connected to a more general aspect of socially situated interaction, that it will be "co-operative." This observation is actually a principle of conversation.