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DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

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. Consider the following example:

There are two types of favors, the big favor and the small favor. You can measure the size of the favor by the pause that a person takes after they ask you to “ Do me a favor. ” Small favor small pause. “ Can you do me a favor, hand me that pencil. ” No pause at all. Big favors are, “ Could you do me a favor ...” Eight seconds go by. “ Yeah? What? ” “... well. ” The longer it takes them to get to it, the bigger the pain it ’ s going to be. Humans are the only species that do favors. Animals don’ t do favors. A lizard doesn’ t go up to a cockroach and say, “ Could you do me a favor and hold still, I’ d like to eat you alive.” That ’ s a big favor even with no pause. Seinfeld (1993)

In the study of language, some of the most interesting observations are made, not in terms of the components of language, but in terms of the way language is used, even how pauses are used, as in comedian Jerry Seinfeld’s commentary. When we carry this investigation further and ask how we make sense of what we read, how we can recognize well-constructed texts as opposed to those that are jumbled or incoherent, how we understand speakers who communicate more than they say, and how we

successfully take part in that complex activity called conversation, we are undertaking what is known as discourse analysis.

Cohesion

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 ties and connections that exist within texts. A number of those types of cohesive ties can be identified in the following paragraph.

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.

There are connections present here in the use of words to maintain reference to the same people and things throughout: father – he – he – he; my – my – I; Lincoln – it. There are connections between phrases such as: a Lincoln convertible – that car – the convertible. There are more general connections created by a number of terms that share a common element of meaning, such as “money” (bought – saving – penny – worth a fortune – sold – pay) and “time” (once – nowadays – sometimes). There is also a connector (However) that marks the relationship of what follows to what went before. The verb tenses in the first four sentences are all in the past, creating a connection between those events, and a different time is indicated by the present tense of the final sentence. Analysis of these cohesive ties within a text gives us some insight into how writers structure what they want to say.

However, by itself, cohesion would not be sufficient to enable us to make sense of what we read. It is quite easy to create a highly cohesive text that has a lot of connections between the sentences, but is very difficult to interpret. Note that the following text has connections such as Lincoln – the car, red – that color, her – she, letters – a letter, and so on.

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 the words. There must be some other factor that leads us to 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 words or structures, 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. Indeed, our ability to make sense of what we read is probably only a small part of that general ability we have to make sense of what we perceive or experience in the world. You may have found when you were reading the last example (of oddly constructed text) that you kept trying to make the text fit some situation or experience that would accommodate all the details (involving a red car, a woman and a letter). If you work at it long enough, you may indeed find a way to incorporate all those disparate elements into a single coherent interpretation. In doing so, you would necessarily be involved in a process of filling in a

lot of gaps that exist in the text. You would have to create meaningful connections that are not actually expressed by the words and sentences. This process is not restricted to trying to understand “odd” texts. In one way or another, it seems to be involved in our interpretation of all discourse. Consider the following example:

HER: That’s the telephone.

HIM: I’m in the bath.

HER: O.K.

There are certainly no cohesive ties within this fragment of discourse. How does each of these people manage to make sense of what the other says? They do use the information contained in the sentences expressed, but there must be something else involved in the interpretation. It has been suggested that exchanges of this type are best understood in terms of the conventional actions performed by the speakers in such interactions.

Speech events

In exploring what it is we know about taking part in conversation , or any other speech event (e.g. debate , interview , various types o f discussions), we quickly realize that there is enormous variation in what people say and do in different circumstances . In order to begin to describe the sources of that variation, we would have to take account of a number of criteria. For example, we would have to specify the roles of speaker and hearer (or hearers) and their relationship(s), w het her they were friends, strangers, men, women, young, old, of equal or unequal status, and many other factors. All of these factors will have an influence on what is said and how it is said. We would have to describe what the topic of conversation was and in what setting it took place.

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 wh-

B: [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.

Turn-taking

There are different expectations of conversational style and different strategies of participation in conversation. Some of these strategies seem to be the source of what is sometimes described by participants as "rudeness" (if one speaker cuts in on another

speaker) or “shyness” (if one speaker keeps waiting for an opportunity to take a turn and none seems to occur). The participants characterized as “rude” or “shy” in this way may simply be adhering to 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.

The co-operative principle

An underlying assumption in most conversational exchanges seems to be that the participants are co-operating with each other. This principle, together with four maxims that we expect our conversational partners to obey, was first described by the philosopher Paul Grice. The co-operative principle is stated in the following way: “Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged” (Grice, 1975: 45). Supporting this principle are four maxims, often called the “Gricean maxims.”

The Quantity maxim: Make your contribution as informative as is required, but not more, or less, than is required.

The Quality maxim: Do not say that which you believe to be false or for which you lack adequate evidence.

The Relation maxim: Be relevant.

The Manner maxim: Be clear, brief and orderly.

It is certainly true that, on occasion, we can experience conversational exchanges in which the co-operative principle may not seem to be in operation. However, this general description of the normal expectations we have in conversation helps to explain a number of regular features in the way people say things. For example, during their lunch break, one woman asks another how she likes the sandwich she is eating and receives the following answer.

Oh, a sandwich is a sandwich.

In logical terms, this reply appears to have no communicative value since it states something obvious and doesn't seem to be informative at all. However, if the woman is being co-operative and adhering to the Quantity maxim about being "as informative as is required," then the listener must assume that her friend is communicating something. Given the opportunity to evaluate the sandwich, her friend has responded without an explicit evaluation, thereby implying that she has no opinion, good or bad, to express. That is, her friend has essentially communicated that the sandwich isn't worth talking about.

Hedges

We use certain types of expressions, called hedges, to show that we are concerned about following the maxims while being co-operative participants in conversation. Hedges can be defined as words or phrases used to indicate that we're not really sure

that what we're saying is sufficiently correct or complete. We can use sort of or kind of as hedges on the accuracy of our statements, as in descriptions such as His hair was kind of long or The book cover is sort of yellow (rather than It is yellow). These are examples of hedges on the Quality maxim. Other examples would include the expressions listed below that people sometimes put at the beginning of their conversational contributions.

As far as I know ...,

Now, correct me if I'm wrong, but ...

I'm not absolutely sure, but

We also take care to indicate that what we report is something we think or feel (not know), is possible or likely (not certain), and may or could (not must) happen. Hence the difference between saying Jackson is guilty and I think it's possible that Jackson may be guilty. In the first version, we will be assumed to have very good evidence for the statement.

Implicatures

When we try to analyze how hedges work, we usually talk about speakers implying something that is not said. Similarly, in considering what the woman meant by a sandwich is a sandwich, we decided that she was implying that the sandwich wasn't worth talking about. With the co-operative principle and the maxims as guides, we can start to work out how people actually decide that someone is "implying" something in conversation. Consider the following example.

CAROL: Are you coming to the party tonight?

LARA: I've got an exam tomorrow.

On the face of it, Lara's statement is not an answer to Carol's question. Lara doesn't say Yes or No. Yet Carol will immediately interpret the statement as meaning "No" or "Probably not." How can we account for this ability to grasp one meaning from a sentence that, in a literal sense, means something else? It seems to depend, at least partially, on the assumption that Lara is being relevant and informative, adhering to the maxims of Relation and Quantity. (To appreciate this point, try to imagine Carol's reaction if Lara had said something like Roses are red, you know.) Given that Lara's original answer contains relevant information, Carol can work out that "exam tomorrow" conventionally involves "study tonight," and "study tonight" precludes "party tonight." Thus, Lara's answer is not simply a statement about tomorrow's activities, it contains an implicature (an additional conveyed meaning) concerning tonight's activities.

Schemas and scripts

A schema is a general term for a conventional knowledge structure that exists in memory. We were using our conventional knowledge of what a school classroom is like, or a "classroom schema," as we tried to make sense of the previous example. We have many schemas (or schemata) that are used in the interpretation of what we experience and what we hear or read about. If you hear someone describe what happened during a visit to a supermarket, you don't have to be told what is normally found in a supermarket. You already have a "supermarket schema" (food displayed on shelves, arranged in aisles, shopping carts and baskets, check-out counter, and other conventional features) as part of your background knowledge. Similar in many ways to a schema is a script. A script is essentially a dynamic schema. That is, instead of the set of typical fixed features in a schema, a script has a series of conventional actions that take place. You have a script for "Going to the dentist" and another script for "Going to the

movies.” We all have versions of an “Eating in a restaurant” script, which we can activate to make sense of this short text.

Trying not to be out of the office for long, Suzy went into the nearest place, sat down and ordered an avocado sandwich. It was quite crowded, but the service was fast, so she left a good tip. Back in the office, things were not going well.

On the basis of our restaurant script, we would be able to say a number of things about the scene and events briefly described in this short text. For example, although the text doesn’t have this information, we would assume that Suzy opened a door to get into the restaurant, that there were tables there, that she ate the sandwich, then she paid for it, and so on. The fact that information of this type can turn up in people’s attempts to remember the text is further evidence of the existence of scripts. It is also a good indication of the fact that our understanding of what we read doesn’t come directly from what words and sentences are on the page, but the interpretations we create, in our minds, of what we read.

Indeed, crucial information is sometimes omitted from important instructions on the assumption that everybody knows the script. Think carefully about the following instructions from a bottle of cough syrup.

Fill measure cup to line
and repeat every 2 to 3 hours.

No, you’ve not just to keep filling the measure cup every 2 to 3 hours. Nor have you to rub the cough syrup on your neck or in your hair. You are expected to know the script and drink the stuff from the measure cup every 2 or 3 hours.

Clearly, our understanding of what we read is not only based on what we see on the page (language structures), but also on other things that we have in mind (knowledge structures). To understand more about the connection between these two things, we have to take a close look at the workings of the human brain.