

## CONTEXTUALISATION CUES IN DISCOURSE

### Abstract

*Is language an abstract system? Can we analyze language above the sentence level? What is the role of discourse analysis? Within linguistics, discourse is often described as language in-use or socially situated text and talk. How can we use written, oral and visual texts in specific contexts to make meaning. We may need to examine language in use, the relation of language to context and the relations of coherence within a text. Communicative meaning is achieved through a process of situated interpretation in which hearers infer speakers underlying strategies and intentions by interpreting the linguistic cues, which contextualize their message. Such cues are called contextualization cues. They are the verbal and non-verbal aspects of a communicative code, which provide an interpretive framework for the referential content of a message. Some passages will be presented and attempts will be made to see how easy (or difficult) it is to create meaningful connections.*

### Introduction

Discourse analysis is a cross-disciplinary method of enquiry, which studies the structures of texts and considers both their **linguistic** and socio cultural dimensions in order to determine how meaning is constructed. According to Brown and Yule 1983:1 the analysis of discourse is necessarily the analysis of language in use. As such it cannot be restricted to the description of linguistic forms independent of the purposes or functions, which these forms are designed to serve in human affairs. Language is always communicative and because of this, it is always addressed to a recipient (either actual or intended). Language is designed to reflect its communicative basis. Even a casual survey of normal linguistic communication will reveal an important fact. Adrian Akmajian 2001:368 affirms that the unit of communication is not always a single complete sentence. Often we speak in single words, phrases and fragments of sentences. Renkema (2004:1) adds to this: contrary to much of traditional linguistics, discourse analysts not only study language use 'beyond the sentence boundary' but also prefer to analyze 'naturally occurring language use'.



If language has to do with communication, we may want to ask this question: How do we interpret what speakers say and what they intend to mean. How do we try to make a discourse fit **into** some situation or experience. In other words how do we try to arrive at a coherent interpretation – do we fill-in-the gap? Most times, we are creating meaningful connections, which are not actually expressed by words and sentences. Gee (2005:5) advises that discourse analysis must therefore focus on language in use, the relation of language to context and the relations of cohesion within a text. We are continually taking part in conversational interactions where a great deal of what is meant is not actually present in what is said. With ease we anticipate each other's intentions. How do we manage to make sense of what the other says. J. Bloomaert (2005: 15) suggests an answer: Interlocutors bear in mind that language always occurs in a context. How language is used and how it is structured depends on consideration of how it is embedded in some contexts. Schiffrin (1988: 4) adds to this: language always occurs in some kind of context including cognitive contexts in which past experiences and knowledge are stored and drawn upon. The patterns, forms and functions of language are sensitive to the features of the language as it relates to the context. Fairclough (2003:3) suggests that to examine the true function of language we must look at the relations between text (discourse) and context and the relations between discourse and interaction.

Let us examine these three utterances with a focus on the keyword ball:

Sentence I: Pass the ball to me.

Sentence II: I went to the ball last night.

Sentence III: The ball is in your court.

#### Interpretation:

Sentence I refers to the object ball

Sentence II has no business with the object ball

Sentence III partly refers to the object ball but with a literal connotation. The ball here refers to a party. Therefore, the correct interpretation of the keyword ball depends on how it appears in the context but in addition to this, there are cues that can lead us to the right answers.

Cue to sentence I: **pass**

Cue to sentence II: **went**

Cue to sentence III: **court**

The "context" of an utterance is an expendable motion. Sometimes the relevant context is linguistic – just the previous and anticipated utterances in the discourse or conversation. But context can extend to the immediate physical and social environment as well; and finally, it can encompass general knowledge. Each of these concentric circles of context can play a role in the interpretation of an utterance. Our contributions to conversations both reflect and affect the linguistic and non-linguistic context of utterance. In other words, according to Schiffrin et al (2001:1) one of the major approaches to discourse analyses (DA) is conversational analysis.

#### The Concept of Coherence

In Gunperz's work (1984:21) he suggests an integrated view of coherence. He suggests that communicative meaning is achieved through a process of situated interpretation in which learners infer speakers' underlying strategies and intentions by interpreting the linguistic cues which contextualize their message. Such cues are called contextualization cues. They are the verbal and non verbal aspects of a communicative code which provide an interpretive framework for the referential content of a message. In other words, production and reception of a message depend upon shared access to culturally defined repertoires of verbal and non verbal devices which are both situated in and reflexive of the interactional frames within which they occur. Coherence then would depend on a speaker's successful integration of different verbal and non-verbal devices to situate a message in an interpretative frame, and a hearer's corresponding synthetic ability to



respond to such cues as a totality in order to interpret that message. Stiffing (1988:10) affirms:

Not only do speakers and hearers use many different kinds of contextualisation cues to situate their communicative intentions but they do so within an integrated framework of interactionally emergent structures, meanings and actions.

### Fragments of Discourse

A visitor to a city, carrying his luggage, looking lost stops a passer-by.

**Visitor:** Excuse me, do you know where the Hilton Hotel is?

**Passer-by:** Oh sure, I know where it is (and walks away).

### Analysis

The visitor poses a question do you know (a question form)

The passer-by answers that question literally by saying "I know" (and walks away)

**Note:** The visitor was making a request using *indirect speech act*. But the passer-by does not see it as a request and so he merely answers the question – do you know. The passer-by has treated an indirect speech act as if it is direct. But we must observe that indirect speech acts are considered more polite than the direct. One major question that arises is this. If the scene took place in a traditional setting, will the passer-by react this way? Will he just walk away after answering the question? It has been agreed by discourse analysts that production and reception of a message depend upon *shared access to culturally defined repertoires* of verbal and non verbal devices which are both situated in, and reflexive of the interactional frames within which they occur. Normal conversations have a discernible structure. They do begin and end in certain ritualistic ways yet there are cues within the context of such discourse that act as signals to the intention of the speakers. After all, discourse is often

described as "language – in- use" or "socially situated text and talk" – Lillis and Mckinney (2003:7).

### Take a look at this scenario:

Can you ride a bicycle? (the speaker needs information). Can you pass the salt? – Is this really a request? Yes it is a request and the listener is expected to perform the action requested. Yet this request has been presented in the syntactic form usually associated with a question. Such an example is described as an indirect speech act and this usually pose a problem of interpretation in discourse. The English language has:

**The interrogative** – question: Did you eat the food?

**The imperative** - command (request): Eat the food please.

**The declarative** – statement: You ate the food.

**Note:** whenever one of the forms above is used to perform a function other than the one listed beside it, the result is an indirect speech act.

### Another scenario:

Someone says to another:

"You left the door open" is this merely a statement? If this sentence is made to someone who has just come into the room (and it is cold outside) it might be interpreted that this is not merely a statement but a request (that the person should close the door). This is another example of indirect speech act and the contextualisation cues may be, in this case, the tone of the voice. So, not only can we identify the contextualisation cues within the utterance themselves (as in the previous excerpts) but the cues can be found in the tone of the speaker.

### The Importance of "Openings" in Conversations

There are many ways of beginning a conversation or other talk exchange. One is to start out with no preliminaries whatsoever e.g. "Something has gone wrong with the educational system". Another is to preface our remarks with an *opening*. For instance, there are a number of attention-getters (called vocatives) that could be used at the beginning of a conversation, which could make the listener more relaxed, and he will be



placed in an informal mood to answer questions posed to him more correctly. Let us look at the previous excerpts once more (now with an opening).

Visitor: Hello mister/madam or good morning (depending on the time of the day) do you know where the Hilton hotel is? Now that he has the hearer's attention, he might then use a conversational parenthetical such as: you know, excuse me! The most common opening in casual conversation is the greeting, which is an expression of pleasure at meeting someone, and once it is omitted, the wrong cue may be given.

### Closing Cues in Conversations

Just as conversations rarely begin with their central topic (but with some opening), so they rarely come to an abrupt end. Participants don't simply quit talking. There is a ritualized way of bringing normal conversations to an end. Schegloff and Sacks (289:19) propose that the end of a normal conversation consists of a preclosing sequence where the participants more or less agree to close, followed by a closing section where they actually do close for example, one can say "its been nice talking to you. Goodbye, bye-bye, thank you, e.t.c.

This paper has concentrated mainly on traditional discourse analysis, which involves looking beyond the immediate sentence (the traditional domain of syntactic analysis) in order to discover properties of language, which are not accessible to sentence level investigation alone. Beyond and before the sentence carrying the message there are attention-getters and preclosing sequence, which jointly put some flavor to the talk exchange. These flavours are necessary in everyday life, for, according to Eggins (2004:4) they finally lead to some creative fulfillment.

### Conclusion

This work has focused on the usefulness of contextualisation cues in discourse. Language is meant for communication. When it fails to perform this function, hearers and speakers cannot infer meanings from their messages. Some of these cues are verbal while others are non verbal which means that in communication, we may need to analyse language

above the sentence level, because, after all, language is not an abstract system. Discourse analysis comes in handy to play a major role in this. We must note that these contextualization cues or communicative codes actually provide an interpretive framework for the referential content of the messages, enabling us to create meaningful connections.

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