Theoretical Foundations of Discourse Analysis in Discourse-based Context Analysis

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Abstract: Language is a vital tool for human being’s communication; speech communication is another important part in our social activities. This thesis will investigate the nature of context. Rather than attempt to examine the whole range of what context might be called, it will be useful to narrow our focus. It is easy to overstate the utterance-specific picture of context. There are, of course, some fairly obvious ways in which discourse can affect context, and both theories of context we have discussed can easily make room for some aspects of discourse.

Definition of Discourse
There are a variety of definitions to “discourse”. According to Longman Dictionary of Applied Linguistics (Richards & Jack et al. 1985), discourse is “a general term for examples of language use, i.e. language which has been produced as the result of an act of communication”. Discourse refers to a series of constant utterances or sentences in use (Huang Guowen, 2001). Unlike a sentence, discourse is not a grammatical unit but rather a semantic and even a pragmatic one. Discourse may be either a sentence or a continuous stretch of language larger than a sentence, constituting a coherent unit. Leech et al (1983) uses discourse to refer to both spoken passages and written passages. A discourse may be either spoken (as are the vast majority) or written by virtue of the fact that a discourse is realized in grammatical units. It is the real language used by real people in real situation. Discourse refers to both spoken and written material in this thesis. Discourse can be a monologue, a dialogue, or multi-person interchanges, or a poem, or a novel etc. It may be either long or short. A greeting, a conversation, a debate is discourse, so is a note, a letter or a research report. Whatever form it takes, discourse should be cohesive in form and coherent in meaning.

 Characteristics of Discourse
Generally speaking, cohesion and coherence are two basic characteristics of discourse.

Cohesion
Cohesion refers to the use of various linguistic devices (grammatical, lexical, etc) to link up the different components of the surface form in the discourse, that is, the actual words we see. Halliday and Hasan points out that “the concept of the cohesion is a semantic one; it refers to relations of meaning that exist within the text”. They define cohesion as referring to “the range of possibilities that exist for linking something with what has gone before”. Widdowson (1996) believes cohesion is best defined as “the overt linguistically signaled relationship between propositions”.

In a discourse, some words tend to co-occur according to the topic. For example, in an article studying the classification of English words, such words as “noun”, “adjective”, “verb”, “adverb” etc are expected to occur. In language usage, words that are connected in meaning tend to co-occur in the same discourse. These words belong to the same set of lexical items, and constitute lexical chain. They can make cohesion among sentences in the discourse.

Coherence
Coherence comes from the Latin word “cohere”, which means “to stick together”. Two competing theories for the definition of coherence have emerged: one emphasizes the reader’s interaction with the discourse, and the other focuses on the discourse itself. The prevailing view in recent years
emphasizes the interaction between reader and discourse (see, for example, Brown & Yule 1983; Brown 1997). Van Dijk (1977) defines coherence as “a semantic property of discourse, based on the interpretation of each sentence relative to the interpretation of other sentences”, Coherence can be considered as the underlying conceptual relations among parts of a discourse depending upon the interpretation on the part of the reader.

Cohesion refers to the linguistic devices by which the speaker or reader can signal the experiential and interpersonal coherence of the discourse, and is thus a phenomenon of discourse. Coherence, on the other hand, is in the mind of the writer and reader; it can be considered as a mental phenomenon and cannot be identified or quantified in same way as cohesion. Cohesion is the network of surface relations which link words and expressions to other words and expressions in a discourse, and coherence is the network of conceptual relations which underlie the surface discourse. They all concern the way stretches of language are connected to each other. In the case of cohesion, stretches of language are connected to each other by virtue of lexical and grammatical dependencies. In the case of coherence, they are connected by virtue of conceptual or meaning dependencies as perceived by language users. We will assume that cohesion is a property of the discourse and that coherence is a facet of the reader’s evaluation of a discourse. In other words, cohesion is objective, capable in principle of automatic recognition, while coherence is subjective and judgments concerning it may vary from reader to reader. Cohesion and coherence are not only cores of discourse analysis but also ways of thinking. Both of them play a very important role in discourse construction and discourse comprehension. Cohesion enables readers and listeners to achieve literal understanding of the discourse while coherence contributes to its underlying understanding.

**Discourse Strategies**

It refers to the discourse producer’s general decision-making and choice of the discourse produced in the producing process. While the discourse-strategic continuity is particular, the writer’s choice of the discourse-strategic continuity is determined by the purpose of communication. In a word, it is the method the author adopts to arrange the layout of the whole discourse according to the purpose or function of the discourse. The continuity usually has the following styles:

1) Continuity of time.
   It is realized by a time chain at the beginning of the sentence or paragraph, and sometimes non-adverbial time expressions can occur in the time chain.
2) Continuity of place.
   It is also realized by an adverbial chain, which also includes the continuity of the non-adverbial marker, at the beginning of a sentence or paragraph.
3) Continuity of participants.
   It refers to the continuity composed of the figures, animals, or those who are dealt with as a figure.
4) Continuity of topics.
   It refers to the continuity composed of the signified of the non-figure or non-animal entity that often occurs in an explanatory or argument passage.
5) Continuity of action.
   It usually conveys new information, in all, abstracting the discourse strategy in the comprehension process not only can set a discourse strategy scheme of a certain style step by step in the reader’s mind, but can help the readers decode it macroscopically, efficiently and correctly (Liu Chendan, 1999).

**Discourse Analysis**

Dictionary of Applied Linguistics (Richards et al, 1985) defines discourse analysis as “the study of how sentences in spoken and written language form larger meaningful units such as paragraphs, conversations, interviews etc. Sometimes the study of both written and spoken discourse is known as Discourse Analysis; some researchers however use discourse analysis to refer to the study of spoken discourse and Text Linguistics to refer to the study of written discourse.” Discourse analysis studies language use above sentence level, focusing on meaning and function. It differs from the
traditional sentence-as-object approach (based exclusively on syntactic descriptions) which fails to account for a variety of language use. Discourse analysis involves looking at both language forms and functions and includes the study of both spoken interaction and written texts. It identifies linguistic features that characterize different genres as well as social and cultural factors that aid in our interpretation and understanding of different texts and types of talk.

Discourse analysis not only concentrates on the function or purpose of a piece of linguistic data but also focuses on how the data is processed, both by the producer and by the receiver. Brown and Yule adopt a position which suggests that discourse analysis, on the one hand, includes the study of linguistic forms and the regularities of their distribution and, on the other hand, involve the consideration of the general principles of interpretation by which people normally make sense of what they hear and read. Therefore, discourse analysis not only emphasizes linguistic features, but also emphasizes the important role of representation, memory, context and inference in the interpretation of meaning. According to Van Dijk (1977), discourse analysis has become a new cross discipline such as anthropology and sociolinguistics, artificial intelligence, cognitive science, psycholinguistics, rhetoric.

Language learners face the monumental task of acquiring not only new vocabulary, syntactic patterns, and phonology, but also discourse competence, sociolinguistic competence, strategic competence, and interactional competence. They need opportunities to investigate the systematicity of language at all linguistic levels, especially at the highest level. Without knowledge of and experience with the discourse and sociocultural patterns of the target language, language learners are likely to rely on the strategies and expectations acquired as part of their first language development, which may be inappropriate for the foreign language setting and may lead to communication difficulties and misunderstandings.

**Conclusion**

Language is man’s principal means of communication. Man uses the language to express his/her thoughts, feelings and perceptions and wants to share them with other people. In this way man integrates himself/herself into a human group, a member of human society. However, mastering the linguistic rules will not always guarantee the success of communication, which is the central purpose of language.

**References**


