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Discourse Analysis
Higher Studies- P.hd
What is discourse?

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What is Discourse Analysis?

1.1 Introduction

Language study and teaching often focus on sentences, but there's more to effective communication than just producing correct sentences. Not all sentences are interesting or relevant, and people can still communicate successfully without complete sentences. Understanding what makes a sentence correct and where it ends isn't enough.

► TASK 1

Here are two pieces of language:

A This box contains, on average, 100 Large Plain Paper Clips. 'Applied Linguistics' is therefore not the same as 'Linguistics'. The tea's as hot as it could be. This is Willie Worm. Just send 12 Guinness cool token bottle tops.

B Playback. Raymond Chandler. Penguin Books in association with Hamish Hamilton. To Jean and Helga, without whom this book could never have been written. One. The voice on the telephone seemed to be sharp and peremptory, but I didn't hear too well what it said-partly because I was only half awake and partly because I was holding the receiver upside down.

- 1 Which of these two stretches of language is part of a unified whole?
- 2 What sort of text is it?
- 3 What is the other one?
- 4 How did you distinguish between them?

The first three questions are not difficult to answer, but they do illustrate a point. The fourth is more complex. The first piece, consisting of five sentences, which lacks unity, while the second piece, with one complete sentence, makes sense. The text suggests that the reader could provide additional information about the piece, such as its layout, genre, title, publisher, author, and more.

Coherence, a quality of meaningful and unified communication, is essential for foreign language learning. However, focusing solely on sentence grammar is not enough. Teachers and students must consider why focusing solely on sentence production is not enough for effective communication.

1.2 Sentence Study in Language Teaching and Linguistics

Teachers and learners may argue that focusing on sentences in language teaching can lead to *ludicrous examples. Mother tongue teachers argue that students already have oral and communicative skills, while foreign language teachers believe that formal skills and knowledge, such as pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar, are needed for communication and interaction. Exercises can be presented neatly in sentences, with a tick or mark for each one, allowing everyone to know their progress. However, this approach can lead to ludicrous examples in language teaching books.

Examples: “The philosopher pulled the lower jaw of the hen.”

“The merchant is swimming with the gardener's son, but the Dutchman has the fine gun.”
(Sweet 1899 [1964:73])

Linguistics researchers argue that artificially constructed sentences are the best material for language study, as they isolate language from its context. Native speakers of a language can recognize correct and incorrect sentences, suggesting that language rules exemplified in such sentences correspond to reality. However, some argue that people do usually speak in well-formed sentences, contrary to popular belief. Linguists often come up with grammatically correct but *peculiar examples, such as “*Sincerity may frighten the boy” (Chomsky 1965:63). These arguments should not be dismissed, as they highlight the importance of formulating grammatical, correctly bounded sentences for communication. However, if language is approached as isolated artificially constructed sentences, it should be justified, not just because it is the tradition. Being a communicator involves more than just making or recognizing correct sentences.

► TASK 2

Some of the following are invented examples, for language teaching or grammatical analysis, and some are pieces of language which were actually used to communicate. Is there any way of telling which is which? Can you think of situations where these pieces of language might actually have been used?

1 John considers the analyst a lunatic.

2 Which of you people is the fish?

3 Please don't throw me on the floor!

4 Cross since 1846.

5 I wish someone had told me he was vegetarian: I could have made an omelette.

6 Chicken and vegetable... hot medium hot er rice pilao rice, er two poppadums and a... what's a bhindi bhaji?

1.3 Discourse and The Sentence

Language can be studied in two ways: abstractly constructed for teaching or understanding grammar rules, and discourse used for communication. Discourse analysis focuses on what gives discourse coherence. Discourse can be treated as a sentence for translation or a sentence from a textbook, or it can be used in a suitable situation to achieve something. Discourse can be composed of well-formed grammatical sentences or grammatical mistakes, and it treats grammar rules as a resource. It can be anything from a *grunt to a lengthy legal case. Discourse is perceived as coherent by its receivers, and it can be meaningful to one person but not to another. This leads to a degree of subjectivity in identifying a stretch of language as discourse, as it may be meaningful to one person but not to others. In practice, discourse is usually perceived as such by groups rather than individuals.

1.4 Grammar within and Beyond

The Sentence The second passage in Task 1 was a unified, meaningful stretch of language, while the first was random *gobbledegook. This could be due to the rules within sentences operating between them, as grammar does not stop with a full stop but reaches over it. This means that if a sentence begins with "The...", there are rules that limit what word can follow it, and there may also be rules that limit what kind of sentence can follow another.

► TASK 3

Here is a well-formed 'correct', grammatical sentence:

*The girls rode their motor-cycles through the corn.

Here are five versions which would usually be classed as incorrect. (Following convention, we use an asterisk to indicate our belief that these examples are wrong.) What kind of mistakes do the sentences contain?

- 1 "The girl's rode their motor-cycles through the corn.
- 2 The girls road there motor-cicles through the corn.
- 3 "The girls rided their motors-cycle through the corns.
- 4 The corn through girls the rode motorcycles their.
- 5 The girls rode their houses through the corn.

Are we justified in regarding these examples as unequivocally wrong in all circumstances? Can you, for example, think of situations in which (3) and (5) would be acceptable? How far do the errors interfere with the original meaning?

Grammar extends beyond sentences, as violating internal rules can produce examples considered as 'wrong'. There are three types of sentences considered wrong: (a.) morphological errors, (b.) syntactic errors, and (c.) semantic errors. These errors can be based on word endings, word order, or meaning. There might also be rules within discourses, limiting which sentence can follow another. For example, if a sentence is written "The knight killed the dragon," there might be constraints on what can be put as the next sentence. This is not strictly linguistic, but rather our knowledge of the world where these events take place.

Two possible answers to the problem of recognizing a stretch of language as unified and meaningful are:

1. Using language rules studied by grammarians and teaching in language textbooks,
2. Using knowledge of the world, speaker, social convention, and what is happening around us as we read or listen.

The relationship between language viewed as a formal system and language as part of a wider social and psychological context is also explored.