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Discourse Analysis

Higher Studies- Ph.D.

Observing and Exploiting Patterns

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1.0 Introduction

This paper move from identifying language differences to exploring underlying patterns in discourse, which can inform teaching methods and text analysis. We will explore micro-structural elements (grammar, vocabulary, sentence cohesion). Also examine macro-structural elements (overall text organization), instead of just showing differences in discourse, the goal is to identify common patterns across different texts. To make sense of a text, one of the tasks facing the reader is to comprehend the connections between its various elements. Consider the following example: Joe was desperate, for everything he had tried had failed miserably. Here 'for' clearly signals that what follows is to be interpreted as a reason for Joe's desperation referred to in the first clause. If we rewrite the example as Joe was desperate. Everything he had tried had failed miserably. even with no overt signaling, the reader infers the nature of the connection. These connections, either signaled or inferred are called clause relations by Winter (1977): A clause relation is the cognitive process whereby the reader interprets the meaning of a clause, sentence, or groups of sentences in the context of one or more preceding clauses, sentences, or groups of sentences in the same text. Clause relations may combine in text to form recognizable patterns. These are the “macro patterns” of text organization.

1.1 Common core patterns of clause relations

There are three patterns of text organization that have been identified by, among others, Winter (1977; 1978) and Hoey (1983).

a. The problem-solution pattern: occurs frequently, but not exclusively, in expository text. This pattern consists of a situation presenting a problem, followed by a solution.

In the problem-solution pattern, the key element that marks the completion of the pattern is a positive evaluation of at least one of the proposed solutions . If no solutions are effective, it can create a sense of unease for the reader, suggesting that some problems are insurmountable. This pattern can also involve rejecting alternative solutions, leading to more complex structures in the text.

b. The hypothetical-real structure: In the hypothetical element the writer reports what has been said or written but does not accede to its truth: the statement to be

affirmed or denied is presented. In the real element the writer gives what he or she considers to be the truth: the statement is affirmed or denied.

c. The general- particular structure: where a generalization is followed by more specific statements, perhaps exemplifying the generalization. Generalization followed by example or examples is one type of general-particular structure. Another type is what Hoey (1983) calls a preview-detail relation in which the detail element provides information about what is referred to in the preview element.

1.2 Teaching suggestions

1.2.1 Text frames

When readers identify patterns, such as problems followed by solutions or generalizations with supporting details, comprehension becomes easier. Teachers should help students develop linguistic skills to recognize these patterns, anticipate content, and understand when a writer deviates from the expected structure.

A useful approach to this task is the preparation of what he Wings and McCarthy (1988) call a text frame. This is a diagrammatic representation of the organization or macro structure of a particular text. i.e. a visual tool used to represent the organizational structure of a text which gives us a useful pedagogical tool not only enabling us to draw attention to macro- structure but also providing a systematic way of approaching other aspects of teaching with text. It helps students recognize textual patterns and understand how textual elements connect.

1.2.2 Text organization

The ultimate aim might be for students to construct their own text frames for complete texts or for chosen extracts, which serve as scaffolding for organizing thoughts and arguments in writing. Activities might include the following suggestions:

First (initial analysis), students are given the text, the complete text frame and a 'blank frame', that is a copy of the text frame without any entries (labels and line numbers). They fill in the blank frame by answering guided questions.

Second (reconstruction practice), students are given the text, a frame completed with notes and a blank frame (as a model). They can be asked to produce a labelled text frame in the blank frame.

Third (labeling exercise), students are given the text, a blank frame and a text frame with labels removed but sentence numbers remaining. Students must assign the correct labels. Eventually students can be asked to construct their own text frames for parts of or for whole texts, with labels and sentence numbers. If groups of students are asked to work together on this activity the results can then be compared across groups. In our experience this generates lively discussion leading to a better understanding of text organization.

1.2.3 Comprehension

The construction of a text frame provides the teacher with a structured approach to the setting of comprehension questions. This was touched upon in the first suggestion in section 2, our text frame provides the following possible series of questions: * What device is given as an example? (situation) *What did the device aim to do? (situation) * What was wrong with the device? (problem) *What did the FDA do about it? (response) * What was the result of this? (response) * What is the author's opinion of the device? (evaluation)

1.2.4. Style

The text frames help in identifying and analyzing deviations from standard text organization. Certain stylistic choices may lead a writer to alter the usual organization which is 'basis for claim'- 'claim'- 'counter claim'. More typically, perhaps, 'basis for claim' would follow 'claim'. This deviation can affect the reader’s interpretation and should be examined for its stylistic impact, this deviation is typically used in argumentative and persuasive texts (claim- basis for claim- counter claim). Additionally, authors often use consistent patterns in their writing, which can be studied to understand their stylistic approach.

1.3.Opening and closing

Every discourse has a beginning, middle, and end. However, what matters here is the complexity and variety of how openings and closings occur, often influenced by cultural and social factors, making them important in language teaching and discourse analysis.

The two examples given (a customer asking for a piece of cod in a formal way and a car buyer stating their request too bluntly) illustrate “ill-formed” discourse. These examples fail to establish the expected social and contextual norms for those types of transactions.

Openings in discourse function at three levels:

1. Ideational/Topical Level – What the participants will discuss.

2. Interpersonal Level – The nature of the relationship (formal, informal, distant, etc.).

3. Enabling/Textual Level – How communication is structured (e.g., face-to-face, phone call, business letter).

These elements determine the appropriate way to start a conversation in different contexts. The overall point is that discourse genres have socially and culturally determined opening phases that set expectations for the interaction.

Casual conversations usually have recognizable beginnings, especially in face-to-face interactions. A greeting, whether verbal or non-verbal (such as a wave or a smile), signals the start of an interaction. Phatic utterances (expressions used to establish social connections rather than convey specific information, like greetings) vary across cultures.

The key takeaway is that understanding discourse helps educators prepare language learners for real-world communication by recognizing cultural norms in interactions. Principles of spoken language openings also apply to written texts, particularly in genres like newspaper headlines. Headlines use specific grammar and vocabulary to signal the beginning of a text. Swales (1988) highlights that titles and heading, while appearing straightforward, carry grammatical and structural cues that indicate the type of content that follows. Overall, whether spoken or written, the approach to discourse openings involves recognizing the specific linguistic features that signal the unfolding content.

Closings in conversation can be as elaborate as openings. In casual discourse, social bonds must be temporarily severed without causing discomfort. Speakers use signals to indicate when a conversation should end. The discourse marker anyway is commonly used in English to signal closure, both in speech and informal writing, such as personal letters.

Language as Discourse: perspectives for Language Teaching
Michael McCarthy and Ronald Carter