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Modern Trends in Language Teaching: Discourse Approach to Text Interpretation

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Abstract

In this paper we develop discourse approach to text interpretation. Being concerned with the study of language in use (written texts of all kinds and spoken data, from conversation to highly institutionalized forms of talk), discourse analysis has built a significant foundation for applied linguistics, including ELT. Discourse approach to text interpretation implies three-dimensional semiotic analysis of the text involving its semantic, syntactic and pragmatic aspects. We pay particular attention to recognizing textual patterns. These patterns are manifested in regularly occurring functional relationships between textual segments that become deeply ingrained as part of our cultural knowledge. We consider the interpretation of relations between textual segments as a cognitive act on the part of the reader. On the one hand, textual segments are related to each other through such universal logical sequencing as *phenomenon - reason, cause - consequence, instrument - achievement, problem - solution* and suchlike; on the other hand, their relations can be viewed as matching relations, when segments of the text are compared or contrasted with one another. Together with cohesion and coherence of the text, logical sequencing and matching represent the basic categories of the so called “discourse” approach to text interpretation that is widely employed in ELT at present.

Key words: discourse, language in use, text interpretation, cognitive process, three-dimensional semiotic analysis, textual segments, patterns, cohesion, coherence, universal logical sequencing, matching relations.

Any language teacher who tries to keep abreast with modern trends in teaching foreign languages focuses his/her attention on discourse analysis as on the main form of teaching. Discourse analysis is concerned with the study of the relationship between language and the contexts in which it is used. Discourse analysts study language in use: written texts of all kinds and spoken data, from conversation to highly institutionalized forms of talk.

Arising out of a variety of disciplines, such as linguistics, semiotics, sociology, psychology and anthropology, discourse analysis has built a significant foundation for applied linguistics, including ELT. For the various disciplines that feed into discourse analysis have shared a common interest in language in use, i.e. how real people use real language both in written and oral forms, as opposed to studying artificially created sentences and texts. Discourse analysis is therefore of immediate interest to language teachers when designing teaching materials or engaging learners in different activities aimed at making them proficient users of the target language. Nowadays, discourse analysis has grown into a wide-ranging and heterogeneous discipline which finds its unity in the description of language in use, realized in different kinds of texts together with their socio-cultural contexts.

We aim to concentrate our attention on some linguistically based methods of teaching text interpretation on newspaper material. We view the act of interpretation as a set of discourse procedures involving the reader's attempts to adequately decode the information put into the text by its author. Discourse approach to text analysis is dynamic by nature as it emphasizes the mental activities of the reader who is actively engaged in building the target world of the text, which is based on his/her background knowledge of the world in general, and how states and events are characteristically manifested in it. The reader has to activate such knowledge, make inferences and constantly assess his/her interpretation of the text in the light of its socio-cultural context in order to figure out how the author's communicative intention is realized in the text.

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In this paper we develop discourse approach to text interpretation implying three-dimensional semiotic analysis of the text involving its semantic, syntactic and pragmatic aspects. Particular attention is paid to recognizing textual patterns. These patterns are manifested in regularly occurring functional relationships between textual segments that become deeply ingrained as part of our cultural knowledge. We consider the interpretation of relations between textual segments as a cognitive act on the part of the reader. On the one hand, textual segments are related to each other through such universal logical sequencing as *phenomenon - reason*, *cause - consequence*, *instrument - achievement*, *problem - solution* and suchlike; on the other hand, their relations can be viewed as matching relations, when segments of the text are compared or contrasted with one another. Together with cohesion and coherence of the text, logical sequencing and matching represent the basic categories of the so called “discourse” approach to text interpretation that is widely employed in ELT at present.

Written texts differ greatly from spoken discourse which is usually spontaneous and unplanned. As a rule, the writer always has time to think about what to say and how to say it. Sentences in a written text are usually well-formed in a way that utterances of natural, spontaneous talk are not. But the overall questions remain the same: What norms or rules do people adhere to when creating written texts? Are texts structured according to recurring principles? Is there a hierarchy of units in the text organization and are there conventional ways of opening, developing and closing texts? We think that the only answer to these questions should be as follows: if we do find such regularities and if they can be shown as elements that have different realizations in different languages or that might present problems for learners, then the insights of written discourse/text might be applicable to language teaching.

There are some grammatical regularities observables in well-formed written texts that explain how the structuring of sentences has implications for units such as paragraphs and for the progression of whole texts. English grammar offers a limited set of options for *creating surface links between the clauses and sentences of a text*, otherwise known as text cohesion. Basically, most texts display links from sentence to sentence in terms of such grammatical features as pronominalization, ellipsis (the omission of otherwise expected elements because they are retrievable from the previous text or context) and conjunctions of various kinds (see Halliday and Hasan 1976). The resources available for text cohesion can be listed finitely and compared across languages for translatability and distribution in real texts. Texts displaying such cohesive features are easy to find, such as this advertisement about telephones:

“If you’d like to give someone a phone for Christmas, there are *plenty* to choose from. *Whichever* you go for, if it is to be used on the BT [British Telecom] network, make sure *it’s* approved _ look for the label with a green circle to confirm *this*. Phones labeled with a red triangle are prohibited.”

(*Which?*, December 1999: 599)

The italicized items are all interpretable in relation to items in previous sentences. *Plenty* is assumed to mean ‘plenty of phones’; *you* in the first and second sentences are interpreted as the same ‘you’; *whichever* is interpreted as ‘whichever telephone’; *it* is understood as ‘the telephone’, and *this* as ‘the fact that it is approved’. These are features of grammatical cohesion, but there are lexical clues too: *go for* is a synonym of ‘choose’, and there is lexical repetition of *phone* and of *label*.

When talking of cohesion in the telephone text, we spoke of interpreting items and understanding them. This is of significant importance because the cohesive items are clues or signals as to how the text should be read, they are not absolutes. The pronoun ‘it’ only gives us the information that a non-human entity is being referred to; it does not necessarily tell us which one. It could potentially have referred to *Christmas* in the phone text, but this would have produced an incoherent reading of the text. So cohesion is only a guide to coherence and coherence is something created by the reader in the act of reading the text. Coherence is *the feeling that a text hangs together, that it makes sense, and that it is not just a jumble of sentences*. As M. McCarthy (2001) indicates, the sentences “*Clara loves potatoes. She was born in Ireland*” are coherent only if the reader already shares the stereotype ethnic association between being Irish and loving potatoes. In other words,

adequate interpretation of the text coherence in this case is guaranteed by the reader's background knowledge of ethno-cultural characteristics of the Irish people. So cohesion is only part of coherence in reading and writing, and indeed in spoken discourse too, for the same processes operate there.

But reading a text is far more complex than creating links across sentence boundaries and pairing and chaining together items that are interrelated by referring to the same entity. When reading a text we have to interpret the ties between textual segments and make sense of them. Making sense of a text is an act of interpretation that depends as much on what we as readers bring to a text as what the author puts into it. In our article (Kirvalidze 2006) devoted to the study of a literary text we already mentioned, that we view any text via intersubjectivity (within the framework of the modern anthropocentricity-communicational paradigm of linguistic thought) as an interaction of the author with the reader. We also noted that reading a text implies adequate perception of what the author has conveyed in his message. Because of this, we treated reading as a dynamic process which requires the reader's "active position". And if the reader succeeds in interpreting the author's message, conveyed in the text correctly, we considered it as the reader's virtual "meeting" with the writer.

In the present paper we again assume, that text interpretation should be considered as a set of procedures and the discourse approach to the analysis of texts, that emphasizes the mental activities involved in interpretation, can be broadly called procedural. Procedural approaches emphasize the role of the reader in actively building the world of the text, based on his/her experience (i.e. background knowledge) of the world and how states and events are characteristically manifested in it. The reader has to activate such knowledge, make inferences and constantly assess his/her interpretation in the light of the socio-cultural context of the text, as well as the aims and goals of the message put into the text by the author. The work of Beaugrande (1980) is central to this approach. If we take a newspaper text which is cohesive in the sense described above, we can see that a lot more mental work has to go on for the reader to make it coherent:

"The parents of a seven-year-old Australian boy woke to find a giant python crushing and trying to swallow him.

The incident occurred in Cairns, Queensland and the boy's mother, Mrs Kathy Dryden said: 'It was like a horror movie. It was a hot night and Bartholomew was lying under a mosquito net. He suddenly started screaming.

We rushed to the bedroom to find a huge snake trying to strangle him. It was coiled around his arms and neck and was going down his body.'

Mrs Dryden and her husband, Peter, tried to stab the creature with knives but the python bit the boy several times before escaping."

(*The Birmingham Post*, 12 March, 2006, p. 10)

This text requires the reader to activate his/her pragmatic knowledge of pythons as dangerous creatures which may threaten human life, which strangle their prey and to whose presence one must react with certain urgency. More than this we make the cognitive link between 'a hot night' and the time of the event (this is implicit rather than explicit in the text). The boy's screaming must be taken to be a *consequence* of the python attacking him. The 'creature' must be taken to be python rather than the boy (which 'creature' could well refer to in another text), since parents do not normally stab their children in order to save their lives. All this is what the reader must bring to any text. What we are doing in making these cognitive links in the text is going further than just noting the semantic links between cohesive items (e.g. *creature* = general superordinate, *snake* = genus/superordinate, *python* = species/hyponym); we are creating coherence. The various procedures that mediate between cohesion and coherence are obviously crucial in any discourse-based approach to text interpretation.

Another level of interpretation, which we are involved in while reading, is that of recognizing textual patterns. Certain patterns in the text reoccur from time to time and become deeply ingrained as part of our cultural knowledge. These patterns are manifested in regularly occurring functional relationships between textual segments that might be phrases, clauses, sentences or thematically

interrelated groups of sentences called micro texts. *We refer to them as textual segments in order to avoid confusion with grammatical elements and syntactic relations within clauses and sentences.* A segment may sometimes be a clause, sometimes a sentence, sometimes a whole paragraph; but what is important is that segments can be isolated using a set of labels covering a finite set of functional relations that can occur between any two bits of text. An example of segments coinciding with sentences is these sentences from a report on a photographic exhibition:

“The exhibition of photographic works was open on October, 26. The stress is on documentary and rightly so. Arty photographs are a bore.”

(*The Guardian*, 27 October, 2005, p.24)

‘The stress is on documentary’ – Why? The interpretation that makes most sense is that the relationship between the third sentence and the preceding ones is that the third provides a reason for them. The two segments are therefore based on a *phenomenon – reason* relationship with one another. There are some other types of logical relationships between textual segments. For example, a *phenomenon – example* relationship is manifested between the segments consisting of more than one sentence in the extract given below, where the first sentence introduces a definite phenomenon into the initial segment of the text while the following sentences (2 -5), representing the second segment, have to be read as part of the act of exemplification for the whole text to make sense:

“Naturally, the more people pay for their houses, the more they want to rename their neighborhoods. Suppose you’ve just coughed up a great sum of money for an unspectacular house on the fringe of Highgate – an area with loads loads of cachet. The estate agent tells you its Highgate. You’ve paid a Highgate price. There is no way you’re going to admit that it’s in Crouch End.”

(*The Observer Magazine*, 11 March, 2001, p.5)

Another type of logical relationships between textual segments is that of a *problem – solution* sequence which is adequately marked lexically as it is seen in this extract from the press material:

“Week by week the amount of car traffic on our roads grows, 13 per cent in the last year alone.

Each year as I walk to work, I see the ludicrous spectacle of hundreds of commuters sitting alone in four or five-seater cars and barely moving as fast as I can walk.

Our traffic crisis now presents us with the classic conservation dilemma – too many people making too much demand on inadequate resources.

There are four possible solutions: one, provide more resources, in the case build more roads and car parks; two, restrict the availability of motorized transport by artificially raising the price of vehicles and fuel; three, license only those with a good reason for needing motorized transport and prohibit unnecessary use; four, reduce the average size of motor vehicles, especially those used for commuting purposes.”

(*The Times*, 22 September, 2005, p. 11)

The interpretation of relations between textual segments is a cognitive act on the part of the reader, who might be supposed to be asking questions of the text as it unfolds. In this sense, reading the text is interactional like a dialogue with the author, and the processing of two segments could be seen as analogous to the creation of an exchange in spoken discourse. Whether this dialogue with the author is a reality or an analytical construct (i.e. virtual) is not a question that can be easily answered here, but a model which suggests this kind of interaction between the reader and the text or the author might be able to capture difficulties readers experience in text interpretation and offer ways of attacking them.

The approach to the text analysis that emphasizes the interpretive acts involved in relating textual segments one to the other through relationships such as *phenomenon – reason*, *cause – consequence*, *instrument – achievement*, *problem – solution* and suchlike can be considered as a *clause-relational* approach, which is based on logical sequence relationships in general. When segments of a text are compared or contrasted with one another, then we may talk of *matching relations*,

which are extremely common and are mostly supported with syntactic parallelism as in this example from *The Sunday Times Magazine*:

“In Britain, the power of the unions added an extra dread, which made British politics a special case; on the Continent, Margaret Thatcher was regarded as something of a laboratory experiment, rather like a canary put down a mine-shaft to see if it will sing.”

(*The Sunday Times Magazine*, 30 December, 1981, p. 14)

In this example a cause _ consequence relation exists between the first two segments, with subordination (‘which made ...’) as supporting evidence. The first two segments taken together then become a single, larger segment which stands in a matching relation of contrast with the rest of the extract, which is signaled by the syntactic parallelism _ ‘In Britain’/ ‘on the Continent’.

Logical sequencing and matching are the two basic categories of the clause-relational approach between textual segments. This view of text is dynamic. It is not just concerned with labeling what are sometimes called the illocutionary acts which individual clauses, sentences and paragraphs perform in a text, but is concerned with the relationships the textual segments enter into with one another.

It would of course be wrong to suggest that the whole process of reading is some sort of perverse guessing-game for readers. Texts often contain signals how we should interpret the relations between segments. These signals are not absolute clues to make conclusions; they are more supporting evidence to the cognitive activity of deducing relations. For example, we may find in a text a sentence such as: “Feeling ill, he went home”, where the subordination of one element to another by the grammatical choice of joining a main clause to a subordinate one is a characteristic device of cause _ consequence relations.

If we consider a simple text like the following, which is concocted for the sake of illustration, we can see a pattern emerging which is frequently found in texts in a wide variety of subject areas and contexts:

“Most people like to take a camera with them when they travel abroad. But all airports nowadays have X-ray security screening and X rays can damage film. One solution to this problem is to purchase a specially designed lead-lined pouch. These are cheap and can protect film from all but the strongest X rays.”

(*The Observer*, 15 October, 2003, p. 8)

The first sentence presents us with a *situation* and the second sentence with some sort of complication or *problem*. The third sentence describes a response to the problem and the final sentence gives a positive *evaluation* of the response. Such a sequence of relations forms a *situation _ problem _ solution _ evaluation pattern* which is extremely common in texts.

These larger patterns which may constitute the whole text are the objects of interpretation by the reader. They are often signaled by the same sorts of grammatical and lexical devices. In the above example, for instance, a contrasting idea, which creates a problem, is introduced with the help of the conjunction ‘but’ indicating an adversative relation, backward lexical reference to ‘*the damage caused by X rays*’ is carried out with the help of the noun phrase ‘*this problem*’, and a forward reference to the ‘*solution*’ _ with the noun phrase ‘a lead-lined pouch’ which is substituted anaphorically by a demonstrative pronoun ‘these’ in the final, evaluative sentence. Both writers and readers need to be aware of these signaling devices and use them when necessary to process textual relations that are not immediately obvious. Such knowledge will assist the reader in the act of interpretation.

So finding patterns in texts is a matter of interpretation by the reader, making use of clues and signals provided by the author, though it is not a question of finding one single right interpretation, very often it is possible to analyze a given text in more than one way. But certain patterns do tend to occur frequently in particular settings: the *problem _ solution pattern* is frequent in advertising texts (one way to sell a product is to convince people they have a problem they may not be aware of) and in texts reporting technological advances which are often seen as solving problems or removing obstacles (as it is shown in the text about lead-lined pouches designed for carrying cam-

eras). *General _ specific patterns* can be found in encyclopedias and other reference texts. *Claim _ counterclaim texts* are frequent in political journalism, as well as in the letters-to-the-editor pages of newspapers and magazines. In the example given below the reader can find *claim _ counterclaim pattern* of the text which has the following lexico-semantic organization: *making claim - counterclaim - evidence of counterclaim - alternative ways of tackling the issues*:

“All western countries face a crisis in coping with the demands made on welfare provision by their growing elderly populations. The problem of resource scarcity is a real one. But perhaps not all countries have adopted so rigorously [as Britain] the view that care should be based on the family model.

Scandinavia, for example, provides residential facilities for elderly people not wishing to remain at home or live with their families, and those facilities are often available for use by local pensioners on a daily basis. Elderly people in the United States have developed communities of their own, supporting each other and running them by themselves, as their answer to increasing dependency. Some have argued against these ‘age-dense’ solutions, likening them to ghettos, but research suggests a high degree of consumer satisfaction.

These examples from other countries clearly demonstrate that there are alternative ways of tackling the issues of caring and dependency, and that the family model of care with the high demands made on women and lack of choice and frequent loneliness for the dependents is not the only solution.”

(New Society, 28 August, 1999, p. 12)

We can see that a number of vocabulary items characteristically cluster round the elements of larger patterns in texts. These words stand in place of segments of text, in linguistic literature they are called *discourse-organizing words*, since it is their function to organize and structure the text.

The problem of such lexical markers is very important in applied linguistics. In ELT it is discussed under the notion of a *procedural vocabulary* (Widdowson 1993). The procedural vocabulary is basically words that enable us to do things such as text interpretation with the content-bearing words or *schematic vocabulary*. The question whether it is possible to delimit a *procedural vocabulary* of such words that would be useful for readers over a wide range of academic disciplines involving varied textual subject matters and genres is currently under debate (Robinson 2005). Specialists suggest that these recurrent features of textual patterning should be exploited in vocabulary teaching / learning too as a top-down phenomenon: once conscious of a larger text-pattern, the learners can be brought to an awareness of the rich vein of vocabulary that regularly realizes it. As a bottom-up phenomenon, learners can bring together in their vocabulary records items that regularly occur in similar textual environments, e.g. the typical vocabulary of problem _ solution patterns of the text. Such lists can be added to over time to build up a rich, textually-based lexicon, which might be an alternative both to the random vocabulary list and the decontextualised, semantically-motivated list of words.

So text interpretation is a dynamic cognitive act on the part of the reader, who is supposed to be asking questions of the text as it unfolds, to be building its target world based on his/her background knowledge of the world in general and be aware how states and events are characteristically manifested in it. While doing this, the reader has to activate his/her knowledge, make inferences and constantly assess his/her interpretation of the text in the light of its socio-cultural context in order to figure out how the author’s communicative intention is realized in the text.

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