

Discourse Analysis and Pragmatics. Text and Context.

In the latter part of the 20th century, linguists were more and more concerned with the unit of study that was above sentence level, the text, and various definitions have been formulated for it:

An extended structure of syntactic units (Werlich 1983)

A communicative occurrence (deBeaugrande-Dressler 1981)

Any passage, spoken or written, of whatever length, that does form a unified whole. [...] A text is a unit of language in use (Halliday-Hasan 1976)

The concept of texture is entirely appropriate to express the property of 'being a text'. A text has texture and this is what distinguishes it from something that is not a text. (deBeaugrande-Dressler 1981).

Standards of textuality

According to de Beaugrande and Dressler, a text will be defined as a communicative occurrence which meets seven standards of textuality; cohesion, coherence, intentionality, acceptability, informativity, situationality, intertextuality

Cohesion and ***coherence*** are text-centered notions, designating operations directed at the text materials. Cohesion concerns the ways in which the components of the surface text (the actual words we hear or see) are mutually connected within a sequence (de Beaugrande & Dressler 1981:3)¹. Coherence on the other hand concerns the ways in which the components of the textual world, i.e. the concepts and relations which underlie the surface text are mutually accessible and relevant (1981:3-7).

The remaining standards of textuality are user-centered, concerning the activity of textual communication by the producers and receivers of texts:

¹ Robert de Beaugrande, text linguist and discourse analyst, one of the prominent figures of the Vienna School of Linguistics. Together with Wolfgang U Dressler, publishes, in 1981, the seminal study *Introduction to text Linguistics*.

Intentionality relates to the attitude and purpose of the speaker or writer. It concerns the text producer's attitude that the set of occurrences should constitute a cohesive and coherent text instrumental in fulfilling the producer's intentions.

Acceptability concerns the receiver's attitude that the set of occurrences should constitute a cohesive and coherent text having some use or relevance for the receiver.

Informativity concerns the extent to which the occurrences of the text are expected vs. unexpected or known vs. unknown/uncertain.

Situationality concerns the factors which make a text relevant to a situation of occurrence.

Intertextuality concerns the factors which make the utilisation of one text dependent upon knowledge of one or more previously encountered texts.

According to Searle², the above mentioned seven standards of textuality are called constitutive principles in that they define and create textual communication as well as setting the rules for communicating. There are also at least three regulative principles that control textual communication: the *efficiency* of a text is contingent upon its being useful to the participants with a minimum of effort; its *effectiveness* depends upon whether it makes a strong impression and has a good potential for fulfilling an aim; and its *appropriateness* depends upon whether its own setting is in agreement with the seven standards of textuality (de Beaugrande & Dressler 1981:11).

From Text Linguistics to Discourse Analysis

The text-internal criteria, cohesion and coherence are considered to make the object of study for the "pure" text linguistics. The other standards, intentionality, acceptability, informativity, situationality, intertextuality, are text-external criteria. It could be said that the text-internal elements constitute the *text*, while the text-external ones constitute the *context*.

Text (as a semantic unit) and Discourse (as a corresponding social practice, a form of language use), both concentrate on how stretches of language become meaningful and unified for their users. The function of discourse is to determine and reflect power structure.

² John Searle, American philosopher and linguist.

Discourse Analysis differs from Pragmatics in its **emphasis on the structure** of text. DA studies how large chunks of language beyond the sentence are organized, how the social transaction imposes a framework on discourse.

Pragmatics differs from DA in the **importance given to the social principles** of discourse; it examines the fact that the way in which principles of social behaviour are expressed is determined by the social distance between speakers.

Dictionary definitions of ‘discourse’ historically describe the term’s everyday meaning as ‘an extended public treatment or discussion of a subject in speech or writing’. Nowadays, they will also include a second meaning which originates in the discipline of discourse analysis and which equates discourse with ‘naturally occurring language use’ and ‘meaningful language use in context’.

CONTEXT

According to Widdowson³, context is made up of those aspects of the circumstance of the actual language use which are taken as relevant to meaning, while for Yule⁴, context is the physical environment in which a word is used.

Typically, there are three sorts of CONTEXT to consider:

1. The situational context (what speakers know about what they can see around them)
2. The backgroundknowledge context (what they know about each other and the world)
3. The linguistic context (what they know about what they have been saying)

The Situational Context

The situational context, or context of situation, refers to the environment, time and place, etc. in which the discourse occurs, and also to the relationship between the participants.

In the following text:

Lecturer Forty-nine? Why do you say forty-nine?

Pupil Cos there’s another one here.

Lecturer Right, we’ve got forty-nine there, haven’t we? But here there’s two, okay?
Now, what is it that we’ve got two of? Well, let me give you a clue. Erm,
this here is forty, that’s four tens, four tens are forty.

(BNC: jjs Bacons College lesson, date unknown)

³ H.G.Widdowson, British Linguist and a prominent figure in the field of Applied Linguistics.

⁴ George Yule, British Linguist, renowned theorist of Pragmatics and Discourse Analysis.

the situational context is obviously the classroom, and the pupils and the teacher are pointing to either the blackboard, or the exercise book. Their "here" and "there" are demonstrative adverbs indicating the figure in the equation.

Backgroundknowledge/Cultural Context

Cultural context refers to the culture, customs and background of epoch in language communities in which the speakers participate. Language is a social phenomenon, and it is closely tied up with the social structure and value system of society. Therefore, language can not avoid being influenced by all these factors like social role, social status, sex and age, etc.

Linguistic Context

Linguistic context refers to the context *within the discourse*, that is, the relationship between the words, phrases, sentences and even paragraphs. It can be explored from three aspects: deixis, co-text, and collocation.

Deixis

In a language event, the participants must know where they are in space and time, that is, the deictic context. This is pointed at by deictic expressions :

- time expressions now, then, etc.;
- the spatial expressions here, there, etc.;
- the person expressions I, you, etc.

Co-text

Any sentence other than the first in a fragment of discourse, will have the whole of its interpretation forcibly constrained by the preceding text, not just those phrases which obviously and specifically refer to the preceding text. The interpretations of the words which occur in discourse are constrained by their **co-text**.

Collocation

The syntagmatic relations, between, e.g., *bite* and *teeth*, *bark* and *dog*, *blond* and *hair*, are called collocation=a series of words or terms that co-occur more often than would be expected by chance.

"I will use the term *text* to differentiate linguistic material (e.g. what is said, assuming a verbal channel) from the environment in which 'sayings' (or other linguistic productions) occur (*context*). In terms of utterances, then, *text* is the linguistic content: the stable semantic meanings

of words, expressions, and sentences, but not the inferences available to hearers depending upon the contexts in which words, expressions, and sentences are used. [...] *Context* is thus a world filled with people producing utterances: people who have social, cultural, and personal identities, knowledge, beliefs, goals and wants, and who interact with one another in various socially and culturally defined situations. (Schiffrin, 1994: 363)⁵.

⁵ Deborah Schiffrin, american linguist, researcher in the fields of sociolinguistics and discourse analysis.