PROBLEMS IN THE CHARACTERISATION OF COHERENCE IN DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

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The more carefully scholars analyse language, the more fully they unfold its staggering complexity. Discourse analysis, the discipline in which scholars strive to account for language in its actual use, relies heavily on coherence as one of its central concepts. But arriving at a satisfactory characterisation of the notion of coherence has proven very difficult. That is not surprising, given the complex nature of the linguistic reality in which coherence is said to be located.

Characterisations offered by some of the contemporary practitioners of discourse analysis indicate how essential and integral a part of language coherence is felt to be. For Cook (1989) coherence is simply the basic defining quality of discourse:

> "the quality of being meaningful and unified" (p. 4).

Tannen (1984) defines it as the product of interactive relationships among a text's cohesive devices, its creator's intentions, other texts, and the world beyond, as evidenced in an

> "underlying organizing structure making the words and sentences into a unified discourse that has cultural significance for those who create or comprehend it" (p. xiv).

Another scholar struggling recently to account for coherence in discourse claims that it is affected or shaped by

> "surface lexical and syntactic cohesion [...] logical propositional development [...] speech acts, indirect speech acts (in which the illocutionary force of an utterance is overlaid by markers of mitigation or politeness), the context-dependence of illocutionary force, and the sequential consequences (predictive power) of certain speech acts" (Stubbs, 1983:147).

Many thinkers associate coherence with the appropriate generation of discourse units (syntactic, semantic, functional) by ordering or sequencing rules (Coulthard 1977; de Beaugrande and Dressler 1981; Taylor and Cameron 1987:2-4), although Taylor and Cameron have argued recently that the evidence disproves the existence of such regular units and rules, leaving coherence to float in a state of amorphous indefinition. But whatever and wherever it is, coherence is critically important:

"the question of coherence is little less than the question
of sanity, of being-in-the-world" (Tannen 1984:xiv).

I want to try to identify and illustrate three different sorts of problems that make it
difficult for the analyst to characterise coherence problems inherent in the medium
of language. To put the problems bluntly,

    1. language as data is inaccessible;
    2. language as structure is impossibly complex; and
    3. language as function is nearly indefinable because it is inextricably bound
up with the world.

1. To begin with, *language is inaccessible* in the sense that the medium in which it
occurs, the raw data of communication, proves very difficult for the researcher to
gather. This complication practically defeats the linguist before he or she even starts
looking for coherence. In the twentieth century, linguists have come to recognise
that language is first of all speech, not writing (Hoey, 1983; Akmajan, Demers and
Harnish 1984). Discourse analysts, although they consider both oral and written
forms of language to be discourse, take a greater interest in the spoken language.
Furthermore, they insist that objects of their analysis be actual, observed instances
of language in use (Edmonson, 1981:2-4; Cook, 1989:11-12).

But the methodological problems, both technical and theoretical, that surround the
acquiring of language samples are daunting. Typically, discourse analysts transcribe
instances of spoken discourse either directly or from tape recordings. No matter
how great the effort expended, however, it is impossible to make the transcribed
text objective, fully accurate, complete and balanced. On the phonological level, a
chunk of speaking almost always includes pauses, grunts, sighs, stutters, restarts,
elisions, reductions, and other *distortions* of the abstractly correct stream of
phonemes representing a particular message. On the suprasegmental level, the
sounds carry numerous features of stress, pitch, and voice quality that contribute to
the meaning of the utterance (Brown and Yule 1983:9-11). If the discourse analyst
could actually perceive all this detail and find some delicate means to symbolise it,
the transcription would be so densely informative that no one could decipher it. So
the analyst usually omits much of this detail (linguistic detail that could be
contributing to the achievement of coherence) and presents an incomplete,
misleading picture of the original speech event, one that emphasises the particular
features or details of interest to him or her.

In addition, research shows that listeners hear conversation selectively, blanking out
the false starts, overlaps, and hesitation picked up by the tape recorder (Stubbs,
1983). Participants who assert that they have experienced a coherent conversation
have themselves partially constructed its unity, order, and meaningfulness by
interpretation; therefore, the researcher who attempts to analyse the conversation is
really dealing with different data from what the listeners heard.

"The presentation of spoken interaction in the form of
transcription has... an estrangement effect. We can see that
conversation is not so self-evidently coherent as we might
have thought, but that the coherence is achieved through
interpretation" (Stubbs, 1983:228).

And when the linguist prepares to explicate that transcription, he or she faces complications brought on by the differences between written and spoken language:

> "A very general danger of discourse analysis is that it
> focuses unwarranted attention on details of interaction
> which had no reality for the conversationalists at the time"
> (Stubbs, 1983:229).

Thus, whether we consider it at the point of production, the point of reception, or as a total process, language is a slippery fish; we cannot keep hold of it long enough to take measure of the coherence within it.

2. The second obstacle to the characterisation of coherence is the *complexity of language*. Assuming that we can sample the language adequately, there remains the problem that the medium in which coherence must be discovered in order to be described is so complex as to render analysis extremely challenging. Four aspects of this complexity are specially significant: language is multi-leveled, interactive, context-senitive and derivative.

The first dimension of complexity is the *multi-leveled nature of the systematicity of language*. For two thousand years, from the days of Dionysius Thrax's *Techne Grammatike*, western students of language have neatly side-stepped or contained this complexity by limiting their linguistic explorations to the level of the sentence, identifying there the three grammatical levels of phonology, morphology and syntax. Today's text-grammar or discourse linguists, however, define as their province a much richer, more authentic linguistic reality; their piece of language may be much larger: a paragraph or chapter or a half-hour's conversation, or it may be only a brief, *ungrammatical* phrase. But they recognise in it many levels and dimensions besides the grammatical ones; and these further levels cannot be so neatly compartmentalised: intersentential cohesion, thematic structure, information structure, function as expressed in speech act or conversational ordering principle, contexts consisting of co-text, world knowledge, situation, and audience, inference, implicature, etc...

Coherence may be achieved or destroyed on any of these levels of, in any one of these features of, language; because it does not *belong to* any particular level and is not necessarily dependent on the presence of any combination of levels, it cannot be described easily. As Stubbs (1983) asserts:

> "No single description can account for the wide range of
> linguistic, pragmatic and social factors which contribute to
> the coherence of discourse" (p. 63).

Assuming that coherence is essential to discourse and given the need to satisfy coherence requirements in their accounts of discourse, different discourse analysts have placed it on different levels of the hierarchical structure that is our language system. Phonology, the lowest and most specific level, can be critical to coherence in spoken discourse. For example, hearers use phonetic information, even at the level of the phoneme and below, to determine what speech style or discourse mode a speaker is using; the degree to which a discourse evidences consonant and vowel elision or assimilation helps listeners distinguish among conversation, reading aloud, and varieties of oratory (Johns-Lewis 1987). Mishearing the phonetic information could lead a listener to misjudge the speech act, thus undermining the

coherence in the discourse. Variations in intonation, part of the suprasegmental phonemic level, can create meaning differences in identical strings of phonemes. Stressing different morphemes in the question *Is she badly hurt?* brings different implications into the speaker's communication (Leech 1983: 70):

a. Is she BAD-ly hurt? S (speaker) implies that S is already aware of the fact that *she* is hurt.

b. Is SHE badly hurt? S implies that S is already aware that *someone* is badly hurt.

c. IS she badly hurt? S implies that S is aware that someone has claimed or believed her to be badly hurt.

If, hypothetically, Leon were to be the first person to tell Luis that their friend Laura injured herself tripping over an armadillo, and if Luis were to respond with question b., his intonation pattern would render their discourse incoherent (provided that there wasn't a female of some species in the immediate context for Luis to glance at as he asked the question).

Coherence is achieved or lost, according to Halliday and Hasan (1976) on the level of intersentential cohesive relationships. Although most discourse analysts today disagree with Halliday and Hasan's rather rigid interpretation of textuality or *texture* in a text, cohesion is certainly important in successful communication of meaning. Given the choice of responding to one of the following *recipes*:

> "Wash and core six cooking apples. Put them into a
> fireproof dish" (Halliday and Hasan 1976:2).

or

> "If the baby won't drink cold milk, it should be boiled"
> (Leech 1983:66).

any sane and humane party interested in avoiding the courts and the prisons would opt for the first, more cohesively coherent recipe, even though its coreferential tie is disfigured a bit by an invisible *de-cohesing* operation that bathes and undresses the virgin apples in preparation for their trip into a cooking dish (Brown and Yule 1983:201).

Among other elements of discourse associated with the creation of coherence, lexical repetition figures in the rather poetic interpretation of coherence offered by Tannen in her 1987 article, *Repetition in conversation: toward a poetics of talk*. Discovering the repetition function to aid interlocutors in the production, comprehension, cohesion and interaction facets of conversation, Tannen argues that the

> "congruence of these levels of discourse creates
> coherence" (p. 576).

Other writers have suggested that coherence resides somehow in thematic structure, the pattern of thematisation developed in the left-most constituents of sentences (Brown and Yule 1983:133); in information structure, the dialogic patterning of information into recurring dyads of given and new information designed to lead the receiver smoothly through the message (Cook, 1989:62-66; Cooper, 1988:357); or in the appropriate performing of illocutionary acts that underlie the lexical strings at the surface of discourse (Widdowson 1978:27-29).

Spreading an even broader net to capture coherence, Edmonson (1981) seeks it in the larger patterning and levels of language. While he identifies a *textual coherence* that inheres in the semantic or textual structure of a piece of discourse, he places greater importance on the *discourse coherence* that inheres in the discourse or interactional structure. For Edmonson, the textual coherence is but a reflection of the discourse coherence, that is,

> "it is interactional structure which gives coherence to a text or discourse, and [...] thematic or semantic structure or coherence is a reflection of this" (p. 5)

> "How [-Edmonson asks-] is it possible to have presumably 'successful' short dialogues which when written out do not constitute 'successful' texts? Precisely because the text is coherent as discourse, i.e. the coherence of the text lies not in its texture or thematic structure, but in the interpretability of the behaviour the text represents" (pp. 13-14).

For sociolinguists of the ethnomethodological school, coherence in discourse between speakers of different cultural groups is often dependent, not on their language per se, but on their world knowledge, their understanding of each other's social and linguistic conventions (Erickson, 1984).

From this small sampling of pronouncements about the nature or location of coherence, we could conclude either that coherence is everywhere in discourse or that analysts have not yet discovered where it is. Hobbs and Agar (1985) provide support for the former option in their interesting article, *The coherence of incoherent discourse*:

> "Close analysis of seemingly incoherent stretches of talk frequently reveals coherencies that were either too small or too large in scale for the analyst to have noticed at first" (p. 213).

Certainly, the complexity of language levels and systems makes it difficult to specifiy and limit coherence.

A second element of the complexity of language is its interactive nature.

> "[...] language is a means of doing things with words with people" (Edmonson 1981:2)

Meaning or coherence results from the play among the features of language at different levels and from the interaction of language users; it does not inhere in static products. A common theme in many of the characterisations of coherence is that it exists in or emerges from a process.

Process is central to the cognitive psychological approach that de Beaugrande takes to textual analysis and the representation of coherence in text or discourse. Commenting on his text-world model for an utterance about a black and yellow rocket, de Beaugrande cautions that the coherence of the text, seen in isolation, is partial and incomplete because in the actual processing of the text there is a continuous interaction between prior knowledge and presented knowledge (1980: 101). In his latter *Introduction to Text Linguistics*, co-authored with Dressler, de

Beaugrande again warns that the *artifacts of speech or writing*, that is, records of linguistic acts, *are inherently incomplete when isolated from the processing operations performed upon them*, and he proposes the very process-oriented definition that

> "coherence is [...] the outcome of cognitive processes
> among text users" (De Beaugrande and Dressler 1981:35).

While the definition is too vague and abstract to assist us toward a usable characterisation of coherence, it does clearly place coherence in human communicators and their interactions, not in the text itself.

The interactivity of language is featured prominently in some important linguistics textbooks as well. The idea that *the discourse analyst treats his data as the record (text) of a dynamic process* summarises the introductory chapter of Brown and Yule's *Discourse Analysis* (p. 26) and recurs frequently (pp. 58, 88, 94). Their chapter on *Coherence in the interpretation of discourse* underscores the insight that the meaning of a piece of discourse depends on far more than the words and their syntactic structure. Finding meaning, or validating the assumption of coherence, is a process that involves assessing the communicative function or illocutionary force of the message, drawing on socio-cultural knowledge to predict potential meaning and thereby focus interpretive efforts, and determining the inferences required to supply missing links in the message (pp. 223 ff.) The importance of mutual assuming and inferencing in the process of understanding language emerges clearly, of course, in Levinson's *Pragmatics* (1983, e.g. pp. 51, 107, 288). Cook's *Discourse* (1989) also treats discourse as process (pp. 57-58).

Several other writers develop their analyses from similar perspectives. Hobbs (1979) proposes that conversationalists creating discourse strive to make it coherent because coherence promotes comprehension. Therefore, it is coherence that causes the presence of coreference, and not vice versa. A speaker knows that both he and his listener expect coherence, so he *can leave many entities unmentioned or minimally described*. The listener, assuming coherence, then makes

> "those coreference assumptions that will allow coherence
> to go through" (p. 78)

Similarly Kempson (1986), proposing a Sperber-and-Wilson influenced, relevance-based theory of anaphora, suggests that every anaphoric expression carries as part of its content a guarantee that an antecedent is accessible, either immediately or via a constructed context premise. A speaker normally assumes that his hearer, not finding an antecedent in a previous utterance or via a bridging co-reference, will assume that he uses the anaphor

> "as an indication to the hearer that he or she should
> construct a context premise such that the appropriate
> representation is derived as a contextual implication" (pp.
> 214-215)

McCarthy (1987) uses the concept of interactive lexis to explain how a speaker gives prominence to selected words through intonation in order to negotiate the given-new information structure of the message interactively with a hearer (p. 236). Finally, Stubbs (1983) emphasises the active, interactive nature of discourse and therefore the evasiveness of the concept of coherence when he considers the

implications of the process of repair in conversation. Noting that ill-formedness or well-formedness are more flexible concepts on the level of discourse utterance than on either the phonological or syntactic level, he asserts that *the notion of incoherent conversation makes perfect sense* and that ill-formedness can be coherent because speakers have ways of repairing it (p. 103).

A third complexity that makes it difficult to characterize coherence is that language is context-sensitive. As early as the 1920s, Malinowski reached toward the idea that language is action in context (Stubbs 1983:3). His presaging insight has turned into one of the most important principles that discourse analysis has contributed to the understanding of language: that language cannot be adequately described in an abstract, idealized form (Levinson 1983:38-39; Cook 1989:10-12). To approach a complete definition of communicative processes requires the recognition that there is a complex interaction between language and its inevitable context in the world, involving connections among language, knowledge, situation and action. (Stubbs, 1983:1). This dimension of the nature of language offers another reason why coherence is hard to capture: it is not to be found purely in the various forms of linguistic data, but may appear or disappear in the state of knowledge of a listener/reader or in the parameters of a situation (Edmonson 1981:14).

The context provided by the interlocutors' knowledge (their understanding about *the organization of events and situations*) has been described under various headings such as frames, plan, scripts and schemata (De Beaugrande and Dressler 1981:85, 90-91). Whether or not an utterance has coherence for a particular receiver depends on the state of that receiver's world knowledge. In the utterance *I was late and we decided to call a taxi. Unfortunately, the driver spent a long time finding our house...*, the definite NP *the driver* makes sense only if the receiver has a *taxi schema* storing cultural knowledge about the purpose and operation of taxis (Cook 1989: 70-71). De Beaugrande and Dressler explain part of a nursery rhyme to develop a more complicated example of how our knowledge of reality and of relations or links holding between concepts contributes to our making of coherence in the texts we experience.

> *The King was in the counting house, counting all the money;*
> *The Queen was in the parlour, eating bread and honey;*
> *The Maid was in the garden, hanging out the clothes,*

The surface text gives us three actions and specifies for each the agent, location, and affected entity.

> "Yet simply by virtue of the textual configuration, a text receiver is likely to assume that the action is in each case the purpose of being at that location; that the locations are proximate to each other, probably in or near the royal palace; and even that the actions are intended to signal the attributes of the agents (e.g. the King being avaricious, the Queen gluttonous, the Maid industrious)" (1981:6).

Meaning lies partly in the text and partly in the receiver's cognitive processing of it using commonsense knowledge.

Another element of context is situation. As Gumperz (1982:204) suggests, participants in an interaction depend on contextualization cues to help them

perceive the discourse coherence that provides the foundation and direction for their interpretation of the interaction. Discussing a collection of sentences demonstrating eleven different meanings of *cut* as verb, Searle (1980) explains that the variations do not signal any inherent ambiguity of a semantic kind but that situations, cultural practices and facts/regularities of nature necessarily enter into our determination of the meanings of utterances. His conclusion is that

> "contextual dependency is ineliminable" (p. 231).

Contextual dependency can have interesting ramifications for those attempting to distinguish between coherence and incoherence. It seems that every time one discourse analyst proposes an example of incoherent discourse in the attempt to characterize coherence, the next analyst in print invents a plausible contextual situation and proves the passage coherent. But if all collocations of sentences may be demonstrated to possess coherence at least potentially, the task of capturing a useful definition of coherence becomes that much more difficult.

The context-sensitivity of language may also be described in terms of the action an utterance is intended to perform in the world. Speech act theory as developed by Searle and others illustrates how the coherence of discourse may be complicated by the presence of indirect speech acts, communications where one speech act functions on a non-explicit level as another speech act. For instance, *Aren't you cold?* might really mean, *Don't stand there holding the door open, you idiot! Shut it!*.

The final aspect of complexity in language is its derivative or representational quality. Language is the product of the human mind, but it is not finished or available as communication until it is actualised by being separated from its originator and issued as speaking or writing. This representational quality creates what might be described as a *black box* problem (to borrow a metaphor from discussions of language acquisition): any analysis of coherence based on attributing certain purposes or intentions to the producer of discourse loses power because those mental acts are ultimately unknowable.

Brown and Yule (1983) touch on this difficulty when they criticise speech act theory as dealing inadequately with the relation between utterance and function (p. 233). In one case, several utterances might be counted together as performing one speech act, while in another situation a single utterance may be performing two or more speech acts, yet the theory provides no means for discriminating among possible intentions in the mind of the originator. In the section of this text entitled *Surface cohesion and underlying coherence*, Stubbs (1983) notes that *the depth of indirection* of much discourse is a major problem facing analysts (p. 147), and after discussing a segment of a labour contract negotiation, he asserts that

> "it is obviously not the case that propositional content and
> illocutionary force are unambiguously retrievable from
> utterances and clear to all speakers" (p. 164).

Stubbs's reference to retrieving meaning raises the point that receivers do not receive the same discourses that producers impart. As a linguistic message interfaces with a particular receiver's knowledge, experience, and context-driven assumptions, it creates a discourse representation in the receiver's mind (Brown and Yule 1983:206). Calculating the location and delineating the operation of coherence

are not made any easier when one has to distinguish between linguistic data occurring in the world and the representations of it in the minds of both producers and receivers.

3. I will conclude by looking briefly at the third major type of problem with language that makes coherence slippery: from a functional perspective, language is too interrelated with other realities to admit definition. Language in use is so meshed with the fabric of reality, so co-extensive with the context in which it occurs, that it cannot be meaningfully distinguished from intentions of speakers, inferences of hearers, and actions in the world. If such is the case, it is also true that the coherence of language will be difficult to precipitate out of these various elements of reality.

In a subsection entitled *The impossibility of discourse analysis?* near the beginning of his book, Stubbs (1983) suggests that analysts face great challenges because language is not so much language as it is some sort of social action (p. 3). Throughout his discussion of discourse analysis, he raises more questions than he answers, and he points constantly to complications due to the inseparability of language from sociological dimensions of speaker and situation. The cognitively oriented de Beaugrande and Dressler (1981) stress the inseparability of language from mental manipulations of producers and receivers, arguing that human beings constantly assume coherence and contribute whatever the text requires in order to create it (p. 8). They claim, in fact, that

> "a presentation is likely to be rejected as a non-text only if the standards of textuality are so strongly defied (e.g. by total absence of discoverable cohesion, coherence, relevance to situation, etc...) that communicative utilization is no longer feasible" (p. 34).

And Edmonson (1981), discussing paralinguistic behaviour to enforce the notion that discourse is primarily to be defined as a structure of interaction, posits a situation where *language* proceeds through a totally non-verbal exchange via shrugs, pointings, head-noddings, etc.. Then he concludes:

> "We face the fact once more then that in terms of the coherence of a conversational discourse there appears to be no essential difference between verbal and non-verbal acts. Any activity whatsoever may form a structural element in an ongoing conversation" (p. 38).

If discourse coherence can reside in any sort of non-verbal behaviour, there is little prospect of characterising it in any traditional sense.

Perhaps the final negative word on the possibility of adequately describing coherence should be left to Taylor and Cameron (1987), since they do such a thorough job of demolishing the conventional arguments concerning its presence in conversation:

> "*An examination of the utterances that conversationalists actually produce leads instead to the conclusion that the final output can look like almost anything, i.e. that no fixed limits may be drawn determining what utterances must be like in order to be communicative. As our*

discussion of discontinuity suggests, in order to make their
utterances cohere, speakers can draw on a potentially
limitless range of resources: from gesture to
'paralinguistic' and poetic features and from situational
context to assumptions of prior evidence. For making
one's utterance cohere is a fundamentally creative act,
and that creativity is not explicable in terms of a simple
choice between the instantiation of one fixed string of
abstract elements or another... At the same time, we must
not assume that the criteria according to which the
speaker takes his or her utterance to cohere are the same
criteria employed by the hearer. For the act of
interpretation is no less creative than the act of speaking,
and the creative act is fundamentally the act of an
individual". (p. 155).

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RESUM

Problemes en la caracterització de la coherència a l'anàlisi del discurs

En aquest article l'autor es proposa revisar les diferents caracteritzacions del concepte de coherència, el qual constitueix un aspecte essencial i integral del llenguatge per a molts analistes del discurs. Hi ha tres tipus de problemes que fan especialment difícil una caracterització de la coherència lingüística: 1) el llenguatge com a dada és inaccessible; 2) el llenguatge com a estructura és impossiblement complex; i 3) el llenguatge com a funció és gairebé indefinible perquè està vinculat de manera inextricable amb el món. Després de revisar els diferents enfocaments

per caracteritzar el discurs, la conclusió a què s'arriba és que la dificultat més important és que el llenguatge, més que llenguatge, és un tipus d'acció social.

SUMMARY

In this paper we look at the different characterizations of coherence, because coherence is felt to be an essential and integral part of language according to most contemporary practitioners of discourse analysis. There are three different sorts of problems that make it especially difficult for the analyst to characterize coherence problems inherent in the medium of language: 1) language as data is inaccessible; 2) language as structure is impossibly complex; and 3) language as function is nearly indefinable because it is inextricably bound up with the world. After reviewing different approaches to the characterization of discourse we come to the conclusion that the main difficulty is that language is not so much language as a sort of social action.