contextos,
Estudios de Humanidades
y Ciencias Sociales N° 8 (2001): 129-138

TEXT AND DISCOURSE: TWO SUPRASENTENTIAL UNITS

Gloria Castillo Pinto

ABSTRACT:

The suprasentential units of text and discourse have become very important in modern linguistics, even though there exists some confusion about these concepts as well as some disagreement about the scope of the related disciplines of text linguistics and discourse analysis together with their theoretical and methodological differences.

Some considerations about the nature and properties of both these units are made here because of their influence on the communicative approach to the teaching of foreign languages. Special attention is given to the phenomenon of cohesion, which is treated in depth by Halliday and Hasan (1976).

RESUMEN:

Las unidades supraoracionales denominadas texto y discurso han alcanzado gran importancia en la lingüística moderna, a pesar de que existe cierta confusión acerca de estos conceptos, como también desacuerdos acerca de la delimitación del alcance de las disciplinas relacionadas de lingüística del texto y análisis del discurso, conjuntamente con sus diferencias teóricas y metodológicas.

En este artículo se formulan algunas consideraciones acerca de la naturaleza y propiedades de las unidades mencionadas debido a su influencia en el enfoque comunicativo de la enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras. Además, se otorga atención especial al fenómeno de la cohesión, tratado en profundidad por Halliday y Hasan (1976).

GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

The findings and proposals provided by disciplines such as Sociolinguistics and the Philosophy of Language have greatly influenced modern linguistics, emphasising the communicative aspects of language. This new trend in linguistics has also helped the development of the disciplines called discourse analysis and text linguistics –based on the units of *discourse* and *text*– about which there is some disagreement as regards the delimitation of their scope and their theoretical and methodological distinctions. There is also some confusion as regards the use of the concepts of *text* and *discourse* and the interpretation of these suprasentential notions (Zenteno, 1982-1983). In fact, both of them can be employed broadly to include all language units having a definable communicative function; we can refer to *spoken and written discourse* as well as to *spoken and written text*. However, it is necessary to consider some proposals in this respect since the traditional concern of linguistic analysis was, for a long time, the study and construction of sentences, regarded as the largest linguistic units to be taught.

Some linguists distinguish between text and discourse using the former term to refer to writing and the latter to speech. On the other hand, Criper and Widdowson (mentioned by

Zenteno, op. cit.) have proposed an interesting distinction between these notions. The first is centred on a formal unit composed of grammatical sentences, whose study deals with the relationships and connections arising from it. On the contrary, the term discourse is concerned with the relationships holding between linguistic forms, pragmatic meanings and actions. Cohesion is originated from the semantic and grammatical relations emerging from the sentences used in making up a message and its different parts, thus constituting a text. Similarly, the connections and relationships holding among the various speech acts forming a message generate coherence, configuring the type of discourse relevant to a particular event. Stubbs (1983) refers to these notions by stating that although the distinction between surface cohesion between linguistic forms and propositions and underlying functional coherence is an important one, they can both operate in a given text or discourse. He adds that the crucial problem in this respect is "to account for the recognisable unity or connectedness of stretches of language, whether this unity is structural, or semantic, or functional".

Widdowson (1979) makes the following distinction between these two ways of looking at language beyond the limit of the sentence: a) text, which is a collection of formal objects held together by patterns of equivalence or frequencies or by cohesive devices, and b) discourse, a use of sentences to perform acts of communication which cohere into larger communicative units, ultimately establishing a rhetorical pattern, which characterises the piece of language as a whole as a kind of communication. Each of these approaches to the description of language has its specific purposes, but they are both complementary ways of viewing language in use.

The duality *cohesion-coherence* involves the existence of other elements that characterise text and discourse and which display formal, semantic and pragmatic distinctions: *sentence-utterance, locutionary-illocutionary acts, usage-use.*

SENTENCE-UTTERANCE

A sentence is a theoretical unit defined by grammar; an utterance is a physical unit, a stretch of speech about which no assumptions have been made in terms of linguistic theory; it is a behavioural unit for which a satisfactory definition has not been found as yet. Its definition as *"a stretch of speech preceded and followed by silence or a change of speaker"* (Crystal 1980) could equally be applied to a one-word response or to a speech, for example. Widdowson (op. cit.) points out that sentences as abstract linguistic objects can be inferred from discourse but they do not actually occur in language behaviour, they are abstracted as isolates from their natural surroundings in discourse. Discourse is the result of natural language behaviour and consists of utterances that are combined in a complex way to establish a relationship with extralinguistic reality to achieve a communicative effect. It is utterances and the interrelationships they set up which convey meanings in contexts of use.

LOCUTIONARY-ILLOCUTIONARY ACTS

The speech act theory –arising from Austin's philosophical work (1962)– is related to the role of utterances as regards the behaviour of speaker and hearer in interpersonal communication. Austin distinguishes three kinds of speech acts: locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary. The act of making a meaningful utterance is a locutionary act. Besides, in

doing so a speaker can be said to have performed an act or illocutionary act. Such acts are defined in relation to the speaker's intentions while speaking. In this way, his utterances display certain force which can be expressed as a *performative,* utterance that must be treated as the performance of an act such as warning, advising, threatening, promising, etc. (e.g. "I promise to call you tomorrow"). On the other hand, the speaker also fulfils a perlocutionary act when producing an utterance, described in terms of the effect that the illocutionary act has on the hearer in a particular case.

USAGE-USE

The process of learning a language involves the acquisition of the ability to create correct sentences, which depends on the knowledge of the rules of grammar of that language, on one hand. On the other, it implies the acquisition of the knowledge of what sentences –or parts of them– are suitable in a particular context. Furthermore, we usually apply our knowledge of the language system to obtain a communicative purpose, which represents instances of language in use. In other words, we do not only express the abstract system of a language by means of specific cases of language usage but we realise it in the form of meaningful communicative behaviour. Hence, the concept of *competence* is related to the knowledge that the language user has about the abstract linguistic rules that will be realised as behaviour in terms of *performance*.

Brown and Yule (1983) view the main distinction involved in the text-discourse duality in terms of text-as-product and discourse-as-process. The former does not take into account any consideration of "how this product is produced" or received, neither does it deal with those principles that constrain the production and interpretation of texts. The latter approach takes the communicative function of language as its main concern and aims at describing linguistic form as a dynamic means of expressing intended meaning; it is interested in the function or purpose of a piece of linguistic data and also in how such information is processed by the producer and by the receiver.

Brown and Yule make some very interesting remarks concerning the process of interpreting a speaker's or writer's intended meaning in producing discourse, which involves the following aspects: computing the communicative function (how to take –or decode– a given message), using socio-cultural knowledge (consisting in facts about the world), and determining inferences to be made.

COMPUTING THE COMMUNICATIVE FUNCTION

It is now a widely accepted fact that speakers convey both social and propositional meanings when producing particular utterances in specific contexts. Labov (1970) states that there exist "rules of interpretation that relate what is said to what is done", and these social rules will serve as a basis for the interpretation of conversational sequences as coherent or non-coherent. This coherence is originated in the actions performed with those utterances and not in the relationships between utterances. For example, a logical connector such as *because* in "what's the time, because I've got to go out at 8?" is assumed to be providing a reason for "an action performed in speaking". This action and the corresponding reason for performing it are identified in terms of their location within a conventional structure of spoken interaction

which allows the interpretation of apparently non cohesive utterances within a specific type of spoken interaction as a coherent sequence. What is really important, especially in conversational interaction, is the structuring of the sequences of actions; the realisations of these actions in linguistic terms lack relevance. In this respect, Brown and Yule also refer to this issue stressing the importance of the speech act theory for discourse analysis insofar as it "provides an explanation of how some utterances supposedly lacking cohesion, form a coherent sequence in conversational discourse".

USING SOCIO-CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE

The knowledge that users of the language have with respect to social interaction by means of language is only one aspect of their general socio-cultural knowledge, which supports our interpretation of discourse and of all aspects of our experience. This interpretation is largely based on the principle of analogy with our past experiences. Helped by advances made in computational modelling of language understanding, linguists are at present in a better position to view the way discourse is processed and comprehended. This may be analysed as the combination of two main activities:

i) a bottom-up process, which allows the individual to find out the meanings of the words and structure of a sentence so that he can obtain a composite meaning for that sentence, and
ii) a top-down process is operating at the same time, since the composite meaning arising within a specific context permits the user of the language to predict what the next sentence is most likely to mean, that is, he is employing interpretative strategies that create expectations about what will possibly come next in the text.

Psychological and computational approaches to the understanding of discourse have provided conventional representations of the individual's knowledge of the world serving as a basis for the interpretation of discourse. These representations are organised in a fixed way as a complete unit of stereotypic knowledge in memory. In this way, the experience of what a restaurant scene is, for example, is stored in human memory as a single, accessible unit: a *schema*. Thus, understanding discourse is mainly a process of retrieving stored information from memory and relating it to the encountered discourse. Schemata –or schemas– are regarded as higher level complex knowledge structures which function as ideational scaffolding in the organisation and interpretation of experience. This mental organisation of background knowledge tends to lead the user of the language to expect or predict aspects in his interpretation of discourse.

DETERMINING INFERENCES TO BE MADE

The process of discourse understanding by means of schemata would require inferences on the part of the individual to obtain a particular interpretation. In general terms, this concept is employed to refer to the process that the individual has to go through to get from the literal meaning of spoken or written language to what the speaker or writer attempted to convey. For example, the hearer of an utterance like "It's really cold in here with that window open", within its specific context, has to infer that the speaker meant something like "Please, close the window".

Inferences may be seen as the connections the user of the language makes to obtain an interpretation of what he reads or hears, and they should not be equated with the various types of connections between sentences in a text. Inferencing is largely dependent on our understanding of the motivations, goals, plans and reasons of participants in events that are described to the individual or that he has witnessed.

TEXT

Within the new current in linguistic studies which seeks to inquire into the cognitive as well as the socio-pragmatic aspects of language in use, Beaugrande and Dressler (1981) have made important contributions. They have mainly dealt with text linguistics within the general framework we have been describing. According to them, the main property text displays is *textuality* (or texture), what makes a text a unified whole. A text is a communicative occurrence which should meet seven standards of textuality, including cohesion and coherence:

COHESION

Cohesion is related to the ways the surface text –or actual spoken or written words– are mutually connected within a sequence. Cohesion results from grammatical dependencies, but there must be interaction between this feature and the other standards of textuality to make communication efficient.

COHERENCE

Coherence concerns the ways in which the components of the textual world, i.e. the configuration of concepts and relations that underlie the surface text, are mutually accessible and relevant.

Both cohesion and coherence are text-centred notions that are complemented by the following user-centred notions:

Intentionality

Intentionality is 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

Acceptability deals with the text receiver's attitude that the set of occurrences should constitute a cohesive and coherent text having some use or relevance for the receiver, to acquire knowledge or provide co-operation in a plan.

Informativity

Informativity is related to the degree in which the occurrences of the text are expected or known vs. unexpected or unknown.

Situationality

Situationality has to do with the factors that make a text relevant to a particular situation of occurrence.

Intertextuality

Intertextuality concerns the factors that make the utilisation of one text dependent upon knowledge of one or more previously encountered texts. This feature is the basis for the evolution of text types as classes of texts with typical patterns or characteristics.

These standards operate as constitutive principles of textual communication, which will be destroyed if they are disobeyed.

Halliday and Hasan have also made central contributions to text linguistics. Below, there are some of their considerations appearing in the book Cohesion in English (1976).

Texts have structure -in the same way sentences do- but this depends on a different type of features. The aim of text analysis is to find out how the reader or user of a text identifies *cohesive ties* (*cohesive links*), those features that cause the different sentence sequences to cohere, i.e. to be dependent on other elements of the text. These are classified into two main kinds: lexical and grammatical.

In this respect, Kenworthy (1991) provides some examples to illustrate both types of ties:

Lexical cohesion

> Until fairly recently, nearly all *waterworks* in both *industrialised* and *developing countries* were originally *built* with one particular *objective* in mind. It might have been hydroelectric power, irrigation, *swamp* drainage, or some other *purpose*. A secondary benefit, such as *flood* control in the case of a *river* in the Monsoon area, might have accrued *when a large dam was built*, but would not have been a primary consideration in the *matter*.

Repetition, synonymy, hyponymy, and word collocation are lexical cohesive devices. Repetition of a word or phrase is the most straightforward of this type of ties, as *built*, used in lines 2 and 5; *objective* and *purpose* and are synonyms. Hyponymy is a kind of relationship in which a more general term (superordinate term) includes in its meaning other terms that are more specific (hyponyms): in the pair *waterworks* and *dam*, the former is a general term that includes the latter. Another lexical device is the use of the general noun *matter* to replace the phrase *"when a large dam was built"*. Also, the words *industrialised* and *developing* collocate with *countries*, helping the text hang together. Besides, *flood*, *river* and *swamp* form a kind of chain of related lexical items which share collocational potential.

Grammatical cohesion

Halliday and Hasan describe the following types of grammatical cohesion: *conjunction, substitution, ellipsis, and co-reference*.

These links behave as signposts on a road, telling the reader "...where he is going in relation to where he has come from". Conjunction can be classified into subtypes: additive, causal and adversative. The following text provides examples of conjunction:

> It is generally agreed that the earth's capacity to provide resources and to absorb wastes must be finite. *Furthermore*, there is little argument but that the earth as a whole is over-populated. *Hence*, action is urgently needed. As to the precise nature of that action, *however*, and how it is to be arrived at, there is great disagreement. In short, it is a problem which at present has no obvious solution.

The word *furthermore* is an additive link, since it signals an addition to an element mentioned earlier in the passage. Other examples of this type of link or marker are: *and, also, moreover, that is, alternatively.*

The term *hence* is a causal type of conjunction, indicating the reason why "action is urgently needed". Other causal markers are: *thus, consequently, therefore, it follows, for this reason. However* indicates a change of direction in the development of the text and it is an example of the adversative type of cohesive links that signal that a different topic will follow. Other adversative links are: *yet, although, but, nevertheless, instead, on the contrary.*

As regards *substitution* and *ellipsis*, in English there are five expressions or items that usually substitute for nouns or noun phrases, verbs or verb phrases and clauses: *one(s), the same, do/ does /did, so, not.*

The text below is an example of how these items are used to indicate grammatical substitution:

> *For centuries, the wind has been harnessed for mechanical tasks, in particular for pumping water. Simple windmills were in fact* [so] *used in ancient Persia and China.*
>
> *In recent times more powerful* [ones] *have been used in Holland to make vast areas of land suitable for agriculture, by pumping away the seawater. The Dutch also developed sawmills, corn-mills, oil-mills and paper-mills –all of which worked just as efficiently as windmills* [did]. *Following Holland's success, many countries did the same. Most met with great success; some* [not.]

In this case, the item is put into a box and an arrow points to the word, phrase or clause that it is replacing and which has been underlined. Ellipsis is substitution by zero; part of the structure of a sentence is omitted, in such a way that it can only be recovered from the previous text:

> *The top priority for some countries is to tackle unemployment, and for others inflation.*
>
> *the top priority is to tackle*

Another type of grammatical cohesion is co-reference (reference). Pronouns are used to co-refer to other terms, as shown in the following text:

> In 1969 work began on the construction of a vast dam across the Zambesi River. When complete *it* will irrigate 1.6 million hectares of land. But since *then*, and particularly

since *its* independence, Mozambique has become increasingly worried about the cost of completing and operating the project. Quite apart from their natural unease at the cost, fierce controversy has surrounded the project from its beginning. Many are worried about the environmental implications of the project.

So as to find out what *"it"* in line 2 refers to, the reader has to look back or refer to the previous sentence. This type of relationship is called anaphoric reference. In the same way, in order to understand the term *"its"* in line 3, the reader must look forward (to *Mozambique*), relationship which is called cataphoric reference. The term *"then"* refers to 1969. Deictics such as *this, these, those*, and words like *such, likewise, same* are also used to tie the different parts of a text together by means of co-reference. The most widely used referential device is the use of pronouns.

As stated above, there is the need to clarify the distinction between text and discourse and the disciplines connected with the study of such units since these terms are still used interchangeably in specialised literature. According to Edmondson (Zenteno, op. cit.), there does not seem to be an absolute opposition between text linguistics and discourse analysis but rather a different orientation towards the suprasentential units they represent. The notion of text represents a structured sequence of linguistic expressions constituting a whole unit and that of discourse, communicative social event carried out by means of linguistic and paralinguistic elements.

CONVERSATION

If we consider discourse analysis as centred on speech, it can be said not to have reached the development that text analysis has, mainly because the factors involved are too complex and difficult to study. Discourse analysis is concerned with the study of how people use language in a variety of discourses: conversations, interviews, spoken commentaries, political speeches, and so on (Kenworthy 1991). The analysis of such linguistic instances has to do with the study of what people are trying to accomplish with their utterances and with the overall patterns employed in these situations. As in text analysis, the speakers' or participants' beliefs and expectations, their knowledge of the world and their cultural conventions about how a message is constructed are of primary importance. One of the most important aspects of this discipline is that constituted by conversation, regarded as "the most fundamental and pervasive means of conducting human affairs". It is, however, very difficult to determine the extent to which conversational behaviour is systematic and to generalise about it due to the wide range of social situations in which people interact, the variety of topics they can deal with, and the variety of participants that can be involved in such an activity (Crystal 1995).

Conversational analysis is concerned with the study of:

a) how speakers decide when to speak during a conversation, i.e. rules of turn-taking,
b) how the utterances of two or more speakers are related,
c) the different functions conversation is used for, e.g. to establish roles, to communicate politeness or intimacy.

THE INFLUENCE OF TEXT LINGUISTICS AND DISCOURSE ANALYSIS ON TEFL

We have included the following considerations as regards the influence of text linguistics and discourse analysis on the teaching and learning of foreign languages, proposed by Zenteno (op. cit.).

As stated above, the main concern of linguistic analysis was, for a long time, the study and construction of sentences, which were considered the largest linguistic units to be taught. The units of text and discourse have only recently started to be given the importance they really have thanks to the proposals and findings carried out in such disciplines as sociolinguistics and the philosophy of language. Some attempts were made to take the social dimension of language into account in the 1960's and 1970's, but the tremendous influence of Chomsky's proposals delayed the advances made by specialists in this respect.

According to Chomsky, a linguistic theory should explain the person's knowledge of the grammar rules underlying the construction of sentences: the linguistic competence of the ideal speaker-hearer in a homogeneous linguistic community. Thus, the central objective of the process of foreign language teaching and learning was considered to be the learner's acquaintance with the linguistic code of the target language, avoiding the complexity or interference that could arise from the relationship of such a code with extralinguistic factors. At present, on the contrary, this process is aimed at interrelating the linguistic code with the extralinguistic social factors involved; it deals with the way real language users employ real language, which makes it even more complex. Thus, it is the functional or communicative orientation which characterises this process and its constituent elements, i.e. descriptive model of the target language, theoretical approach, methodology and materials.

Zenteno maintains that it is essential for specialists in this field to implement the task that will allow learners to acquire a communicative competence in the target language, a socio-pragmatic competence that will allow them to have access to the interpretation and production of discourses that are socially suitable to specific communicative events. For this author, the acquisition of linguistic competence cannot guarantee the acquisition of communicative competence; in fact, the former should be regarded as a component element of the latter. At present, therefore, it is not possible to put forward the complete development of the communicative element as a central objective, but just specify what area of the competence is intended to be developed.

The above mentioned process should foster the necessary conditions for the learner to be involved in a communicative process of social interaction. He should take part in real communicative events, playing the role of addresser, speaker/writer or addressee, hearer/reader justified by social interaction causes. For Candlin (mentioned by Zenteno) the learner should take an active part in the exploration and discovery of the dynamics of communication. Furthermore, the teaching techniques should be reoriented, and their guiding principle should be the transference from the teacher's descriptive teaching to the student's interpretative task of discourse aiming at the development of strategies and skills for discourse processing as the final objective of the syllabus. In other words, the learner should become a potential discourse analyst. This author warns us against exposing the learner or involving him in the construction of discourses merely with the purpose of internalising and employing the rhetorical and pragmatic aspects in quantitative terms. This would transform

the task of the development of communicative competence into a process of making an inventory of communicative notions and functions.

REFERENCES

Austin, J. L. (1962): *How to do things with words.* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Brown, G. and **Yule, G.** (1983): *Discourse analysis.* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Crystal, D. (1980): *A first dictionary of linguistics and phonetics.* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Crystal, D. (1987): *The Cambridge encyclopaedia of language.* Cambridge, Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge.

Halliday, M.A.K. and **Hasan, R.** (1976): *Cohesion in English.* London, Longman.

Kenworthy, J. (1991): *Language in action: an introduction to modern linguistics.* Essex, Longman Group Limited.

Labov, W. (1970): *Sociolinguistic patterns.* Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press.

Stubbs, M. (1983): *Discourse analysis.* Oxford, Basil Blackwell.

Widdowson, H.G. (1979): *Explorations in applied linguistics.* Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Zenteno, C. (1982-1983): "Lenguas Modernas 9-10. El análisis del discurso y la lingüística textual: Sus influencias" en *EALE.* Santiago, Universidad de Chile.