



Textlinguistics : An Overview

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WHAT IS TEXT LINGUISTICS?

Text linguistics is the study of text as a product (text grammar) or as a process (theory of text).

What is a TEXT?

- **A piece of spoken or written language. A text may be considered from the point of view of its structure and/or its functions, e.g. warning, instructing, carrying out a transaction. A full understanding of a text is often impossible without reference to the context in which it occurs.**
- **“A text will be defined as a communicative occurrence which meets seven standards of textuality**

From 'sentence' to 'text'

A look at the development of linguistic theory in this century shows a slow shift away from a *sentential* perspective (as expressed primarily by Chomsky and his many followers) to a more *textual* or *discoursal* approach

The 'text' as linguistic unit

Different approaches to the study of texts from a linguistic perspective have been put forward - e.g. *text grammar* (Van Dijk 1972) vs. *text linguistics* (De Beaugrande & Dressler 1981) vs. *discourse analysis* (Brown & Yule 1983, Schiffrin 1994), and this has given rise to the perception that it is difficult to use only one approach when studying texts.

Text and Discourse

Text is a behavioral non-interactive event restricted to your experience with understanding its characteristics and its meaning or information as its singular purpose. Discourse, in any medium, is a social interactive event with many layers of communication and many layers of purpose.

- A **text grammar** (cf. Van Dijk 1972) aims to establish a model with which the grammatical structures of texts can be described (quite similar to Chomsky's transformational approach).

Text linguistics (cf. De Beaugrande & Dressler 1981) is “... devoted to describing how texts are created and understood” (Donnelly 1994:18) and in so doing studies the “... defining properties of texts - what constitutes their textuality or texture...” (Crystal 1992:387).

Discourse analysis (cf. Renkema 1993, Schiffrin 1994) entails the analysis of chiefly written texts - especially the "... analysis of utterances as social inter-action" (Schiffrin 1994:419). However, it seems that it is very difficult to define "discourse" precisely - Schiffrin (1994:42) for example says that discourse analysis "... is one of the most vast, but also least defined, areas in linguistics".

- **Principles:**

- The seven standards (renamed as 'principles' by De Beaugrande in 1995) referred to are

- **cohesion, coherence, intentionality, acceptability, informativity, contextuality and intertextuality.**

- **Cohesion:**

Cohesion describes the ways in which **components** of the sentences of a text, i.e. the *words* we actually hear and use, are *mutually connected* (grammatically and lexically).

*reference,
substitution,
ellipsis,
conjunction
lexical
cohesion.*

Reference as cohesive device has to do with the introduction of a new item in the text and the subsequent referral to that same item by means of a another item, usually a shorter form (popularly referred to as a ‘pro-form’).

Pronouns, demonstratives, comparatives, a variety of lexical constructions, even *adverbs* and *adjectives* are used for this function.

Pronouns (e.g. *it, they, he, she, them*, etc.),
demonstratives (*this, that, these, those*), **the**
article *the*, and **items like** *such as*.

Respect *a man*, *he* will do the more. (**anaphoric**)

When I met *her*, *Mary* looked ill. (**cataphoric**)

(**Mary is standing there**) I like *her*. (**exophoric**)

Substitution

The process or result of replacing one word by another at a particular position in a structure is called *substitution*.

The word which refers back to a previously occurring element of structure may be called *a substitute word*.

There are three types of substitution, that is, *nominal* (to replace a noun or noun phrase), *verbal* (to replace a verb phrase) and *clausal* (to replace a clause) *substitution*.

Ellipsis

- Another common cohesive device in discourse is to leave out a word or phrase of a sentence for reasons of economy, emphasis or style, and the omitted parts can only be recovered by the reader from the previous discourse. Such a phenomenon is called *ellipsis*, which is actually a kind of “substitution by zero”. There are three types of ellipsis, i.e. *nominal*, *verbal* and *clausal*.

Conjunction

Conjunction refers to an item or a process whose primary function is to connect words or other constructions.

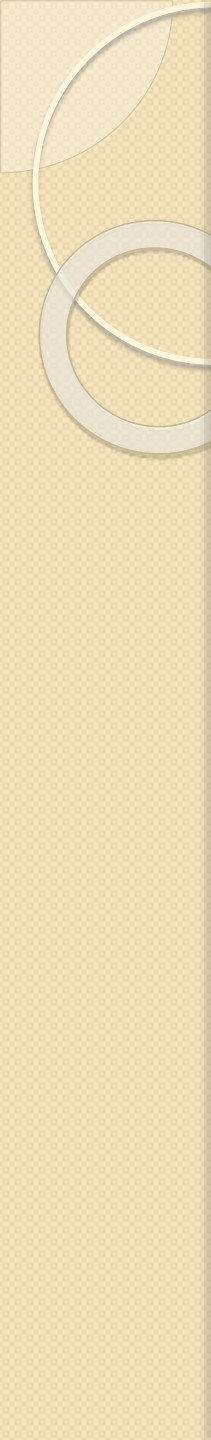
I was not invited. *Otherwise*, I would have been there.

Lexical cohesion

- The donkey died; *the poor creature* has worked hard all his life.
- (i) *Repetition*
- There was *a cat* on the table. *The cat* was smiling.
- (ii) *Synonym*
- He got a lot of *presents* from his friends and family. All the *gifts* were wrapped in colored paper.
- (iii) *Superordinate*
- Yesterday, *a pigeon* carried the first message from Pinhurst to Silbury. *The bird* covered the distance in three minutes.

Coherence

The “connectedness” which we experience in our interpretation of normal discourses is not simply based on connections between the words. There must be some other factor which leads us to distinguish connected discourses which make sense from those which do not. This factor is usually described as *coherence*.

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- **The key to the concept of coherence is not something which exists in the language, but something which exists in people. It is people who “make sense” of what they read and hear. They try to arrive at an interpretation which is in line with their experience of the way the world is.**

Coherence is probably the main component of any form of textual study because if a text is not fully *understood* a ‘good’ text was not produced. It is the aim and task of text linguistics research to try to determine what makes one text ‘*acceptable*’ and another one ‘unacceptable’. It is fairly difficult to establish what precisely makes a text ‘coherent’.

Intentionality and *acceptability* are generally regarded as a 'pair' of principles. In any text there is a producer who has the intention to produce a sound piece of information to a receptor. The receptor, on his or her part needs to be willing to accept the proffered text as a communicative text. In order to do this both producer and addressee have to adhere to the pragmatic cooperative principle which states that one has to make the maximum effort to enable a piece of intended communication to be a success. Knowledge of **pragmatic** principles therefore makes this aspect of textuality 'work' or not.

• ***Informativity*** broadly has to do with the way in which parts of the text have communicative value. For example: a definite expression like *the man with the golden gun* has more communicative value than a pronoun like *him/his*. Knowledge of informativity systems (as put forward by the Functional Sentence Perspective with the aid of the concept of “Communicative Dynamism”) as well as knowledge of the informativity value of **syntactic** expressions are essential here.

Contextuality focuses on the very important role the **context** plays in any form of communication. Trask (1995:68) is quite emphatic in this regard when he states that “*Every text - that is everything that is said and written - unfolds in some context of use*”. This in effect means that in every situation in which language is used, the quality and effect of the communication is determined by the contextual knowledge shared by the participants.

Intertextuality is the least linguistic principle of all the principles of textuality. This principle usually has to do with the study of literature and it literally means that the formation and understanding of one text will be influenced by the structure of another text similar to it.

TEXT LINGUISTICS AND THE LINGUISTIC SUB-DISCIPLINES

If we make a diagram with the principles of textuality on the one end, and the different linguistic sub-disciplines on the other side, we ought to see the picture more clearly:

Cohesion (by means of *reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction* and *lexical cohesion*)

Syntax

Semantics

Morphology

Phonology

Normative grammar

Semantics

Cognitive linguistics

Pragmatics

Pragmatics

Semantics (information systems)

Syntax

Pragmatics

Sociolinguistics

Literary theory

Coherence

Intentionality

Acceptability

Informativity

Contextuality

Intertextuality

THANK YOU