

DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

GILLIAN BROWN

PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH AS AN INTERNATIONAL LANGUAGE
UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

GEORGE YULE

PROFESSOR OF LINGUISTICS
LOUISIANA STATE UNIVERSITY

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CHAPTER 4.1 AND 4.2
THEME

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According to de Beaugrande, 'this node-sharing is a graphic correlate of Topic' (1980: 94). Clearly, what de Beaugrande understands as 'topic' is what may be described as a 'topic entity' (see section 4.3). We have already argued that a 'discourse topic' is a much more complex concept. However, de Beaugrande's claim, based on his analysis of simple text, is indicative of how far it is possible to take an extremely limited view of 'topic' when the data studied is so limited.

In fact, we might go further and state that much of the research reported in the literature on issues like 'topic', 'text-structure' and 'text-content' has been restricted to such unrepresentative discourse data that the findings are unlikely to have much wider application in the analysis of discourse. The discourse analyst may glean useful insights into some aspects of simple text from this research, but he cannot forever restrict himself to investigating versions of material like 'The farmer and the donkey' or 'The rocket in the desert'.

One of the issues de Beaugrande (1980: 92) shows an awareness of, but does not investigate, is the fact that 'the heavy use of sentences in comprehension models keeps us from addressing the question of how long a stretch of text people actually process at one time'. It seems unreasonable to suggest that whole narrative texts, for example, are processed in one single sweep. If there are smaller units of discourse, what are their boundaries like, what components do they contain, and how are they internally organised? These are questions we shall attempt to answer in the course of Chapter 5.

4

'Staging' and the representation of discourse structure

4.1 The linearisation problem

One of the constraints on the speaker / writer is that he can produce only one word at a time. When he orders these single words into sentences, and those sentences into texts, he confronts what has come to be called the 'linearisation problem'. He has to choose a beginning point. This point will influence the hearer / reader's interpretation of everything that follows in the discourse since it will constitute the initial textual context for everything that follows. Consider just two types of invented examples. First of all, consider the effect of an identical attributive description being preceded by different evaluative comments:

- (1)
 - a. I can't stand Sally Binns.
She's tall and thin and walks like a crane.
 - b. I do admire Sally Binns.
She's tall and thin and walks like a crane.

In *a* the attributes *tall and thin and walks like a crane* must be assumed to be unattractive, awkward, ungainly. In *b* those same properties are now endowed with elegance and grace.

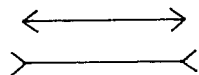
Consider next the effect of linear sequencing on the interpretation of events in time where 'the listener can be expected to derive different implicatures from different orderings' (Levelt, 1981: 91):

- (2)
 - a. She married and became pregnant.
 - b. She became pregnant and married.

There is, as Levelt reminds us, an *ordo naturalis*, whereby it is assumed that, if there is no cue to the contrary, the first-mentioned event happened first and the second-mentioned event followed it. It is, then, open to the hearer / reader to draw implicatures from that

ordering, implicatures which will be constrained by both the content of what is said and stereotypical expectations based on previous experience (cf. discussion in 2.4).

We are familiar, in the field of visual perception, with effects produced by presenting the same stimulus in a different context. A block of colour produced in the centre of a light surround may be perceived as being much darker than that same block of colour presented in the centre of a dark surround. Similarly a line presented in a given context is perceived as being longer than a



line of the same length which is presented in a different context. In a similar way, understanding of verbal input is processed against the relevant background of the immediately preceding co-text (within, of course, a specified context). The same sequence of words may take on a different 'value' (Widdowson, 1978) when it is uttered in a different co-text. We shall consider this effect, first with respect to the internal structure of messages at the sentence level, and then with respect to the organisation of larger stretches of discourse.

4.2 Theme

We shall discuss the linearisation process at this level only very briefly. This means we are obliged to cut several corners in our discussion. In particular we shall speak of the thematic organisation of the *sentence*. It is important to appreciate, however, that in complex and compound sentences a separate thematic organisation will be assigned to each *clause* (for an extended discussion of processes of thematisation in English, see Halliday, 1967). It is, further, going to be necessary in this section to cite as examples several sets of constructed sentences in order to demonstrate the potentially contrastive effects of different structures.

We shall use the term *theme* to refer to a formal category, the left-most constituent of the sentence. Each simple sentence has a **theme** 'the starting point of the utterance' and a **rheme**, everything else that follows in the sentence which consists of 'what the speaker

states about, or in regard to, the starting point of the utterance' (Mathesius, 1942). The theme, then, is what speakers / writers use as what Halliday calls a 'point of departure' (1967: 212). In many cases (often considered to be the unmarked or neutral cases) the theme of declarative sentences will be a noun phrase (the grammatical subject), that of interrogatives the interrogative word, and that of imperatives the imperative form of the verb. In our discussion we shall focus on simple declarative sentences and consider their thematic, rather than their syntactic, structure.

It is a striking feature of English, as of many other languages, that there exists a very wide range of syntactic forms which can be used by the speaker to convey the same propositional or cognitive content. Consider a few of the syntactic forms available in English:

- (3)
 - a. John kissed Mary.
 - b. Mary was kissed by John.
 - c. It was John who kissed Mary.
 - d. It was Mary who was kissed by John.
 - e. What John did was kiss Mary.
 - f. Who John kissed was Mary.
 - g. Mary, John kissed her.

The same propositional content is expressed each time. In each case it is asserted that kissing went on and that John did the kissing and that Mary was the one who was kissed. If the only reason for having syntactic structure were to permit us to express propositional content, it is hard to see why there should be such an immense variety of forms (only a few of which are listed above) to permit the expression of that propositional content. Why do we find this wide variety of structures?

A number of different answers to this question have been proposed. Alice Davidson (1980) suggests 'The more marked the construction, the more likely that an implicated meaning will be that which the utterance is intended to convey', where her own sentence nicely, iconically, demonstrates the deliberate way in which she is manipulating the syntax to make her point. She suggests taking the active form as the normal, unmarked, form for the declarative sentence and claims that the passive may for example be used to convey a humorous or derogatory effect. So to the question 'Did John kiss Mary?' a cautious friend might reply

'Well, Mary was kissed by John.' It is clearly not the case, however, that using the passive necessarily has a marked effect.

From the discourse analyst's point of view, the most wide-ranging and interesting approach must be that which considers the effect of using one sentential form rather than another in the context of discourse. It is clearly the case that (3a-g) could not all function satisfactorily as answers to the same question. A speaker producing these utterances would have different assumptions about the state of knowledge of his hearer, that is about his hearer's presuppositions. Thus, in answer to the question 'What did John do?', (3a) seems possible and so does (3e), but the rest seem less appropriate; (3b) seems to be about *Mary* rather than John; (3c) seems to imply that the hearer already knows that someone kissed Mary and identifies *John* as the individual who did it; (3d) seems to imply that the hearer knows that John kissed somebody and identifies the recipient as *Mary* (and may indeed, with contrastive intonation on *Mary*, indicate that it was *Mary* rather than somebody else who was the recipient); (3f) similarly assumes the hearer knows that John kissed somebody; (3g) seems more appropriate as an answer to the question *what happened to Mary?*

With simple examples like these, it seems reasonable to suggest that what is primarily at issue is the judgement that the speaker makes about what the hearer believes to be the case with respect to what he wants to talk about. Halliday demonstrates, with an effective example, the dislocating effect on a text of changing the thematic structure. The occasion in each case must be taken as one in which a reporter is announcing on a radio programme what is happening at a reception for three astronauts who have recently completed a successful mission:

- (4)
- a. The sun's shining, it's a perfect day. Here come the astronauts. They're just passing the Great Hall; perhaps the President will come out to greet them. No, it's the admiral who's taking the ceremony . . .
 - b. It's the sun that's shining, the day that's perfect. The astronauts come here. The Great Hall they're just passing; he'll perhaps come out to greet them, the President. No, it's the ceremony that the admiral's taking . . .

This passage was presented by Halliday at a Systemic Workshop in the early seventies. For a similar example see Halliday, 1978.

Here the speaker in *a* simply asserts a sequence of facts and opinions which he thinks will interest his listeners. (We shall not discuss the internal structure of this sequence of assertions, merely note that, having set the scene, he clearly expects to report events as they occur in time, floating opinions when nothing of interest is happening.) This speaker's utterances could be seen as replies to a series of very general questions like *what's going on?*, *what's happening now?* The 'speaker' in *b* on the other hand would have to be imputing a great deal of knowledge to his hearer. The first two clauses appear to answer questions like *what's shining?*, *what's perfect?* The last sentence appears to contradict a belief which the speaker imputes to his listeners, namely that they suppose the admiral will be 'taking' something other than the ceremony. It is hard for the processor to construct a coherent model of what is going on from the text in (b), even though the propositional content is the same as that in text (a) and the cohesive links (see 6.1) are maintained.

The problem Halliday illustrates here is one which is familiar to many writers who pause in the middle of a paragraph, uncertain how to connect the next thing they want to say with the last sentence. It is sometimes possible to force a link with a connector like *however* or *therefore*, but sometimes it is necessary for the writer to recast his proposed sentence, to reorganise the syntactic expression. Whereas in written language we generally only see the finished product, so that we have no indication of where the writer may have made such a correction, in spoken language we can sometimes observe a speaker reorganising what he wants to say and thereby producing a different thematic structure:

- (5)
- a. (a departmental discussion about spending money)
X: there was a gift of about £38
Y: well that isn't a gift + it is earmarked because + well + *the money is* + *in about 1975* some money was . . .
 - b. (a former Minister of Transport interviewed after a motorway accident in fog)
I'm going to introduce + mm + as a + certainly as a trial a + a measure of segregation ++ *this will - one cannot* make it compulsory + because of the difficulties of enforcement . . .
 - c. (conversation between young woman and her aunt)
'cause there was *a man in - my father's* in the Scouts . . .

he's a county commissioner now . . . and eh one of his oldest scoutmasters . . .

In *a* and *b* the speakers appear to have embarked on one structure, which they decide is unsatisfactory, and modify it in midstream to produce a different thematic organisation. In *c* a more extensive reorganisation takes place as the speaker evidently realises that her aunt may not have access to the relevant information that her father is in the Scouts so she stops talking about this 'man', announces that her father is in the Scouts, and then after some local interaction with her aunt, reverts to talking about the man in his role as 'a scoutmaster of her father's'.

Whereas we may not be able to perceive this self-monitoring process at work in written language, it may be demonstrated, by requiring subjects to choose one of a set of possible continuation sentences, that there are preferred thematic sequences, in some genres of discourse at least, which will lead subjects to prefer 'marked' syntactic forms. Thus, given a constructed text like this:

- (6) a. The Prime Minister stepped off the plane.
- b. Journalists immediately surrounded her.

or

- c. She was immediately surrounded by journalists.

There is a preference for *c* as the continuation sentence, rather than *b*. We suppose that this is because readers prefer to maintain the same subject (or *discourse topic entity* – a notion to be developed in the next section). The effect becomes even more striking if there are no competing animates, as in:

- d. She was immediately buffeted by the wind.

or

- e. The wind immediately buffeted her.

The passive (d) seems to be the natural choice here. Given the choice of an active sentence which continues the subject and marks the theme as agent, there is virtual unanimity of preferences for the active form:

- f. All the journalists were immediately smiled at by her.

or

- g. She immediately smiled at all the journalists.

Some recent studies have examined the distribution of some

sentential types in discourse genres of different kinds (see Jones, 1977 and Prince, 1978). It seems clear that some sentential types have a particularly narrow range of distribution. Thus, in expository prose, *wh*-clefts, in which, as Prince points out, the content of the introductory *wh*-clause is presupposed information, have a privilege of distribution limited almost exclusively to three functions:

- (7) a. introducing the discussion as in:
 What is most striking in the behaviour of newts is . . .
 What is particularly worrying about the Cabinet's view of collective responsibility is . . .
 What I'm going to talk to you about today is . . .
- b. summarising the discussion as in:
 What I have tried to argue then is . . .
 What we have been considering is . . .
- c. more rarely, to indicate explicit contrast as in:
 You may find peace in the bosom of many religions. What is unique about what Christianity has to offer is . . .

We are grateful to Mahmoud Ayad from whose analysis we draw and from whose extensive corpus of *wh*-clefts we have borrowed these examples.

We have proceeded so far on the simplifying assumption that the left-most constituent in the sentence is the grammatical subject of the declarative sentence. This permits a simple conflation, made by many scholars, of the categories *theme* and *grammatical subject*. Thus, in discussion of discourse one may find the term *theme* rather than grammatical subject used (e.g. in Clark & Clark, 1977). It is important to note that the left-most constituent (as in (3g)) is not always the grammatical subject. It is frequently the case, for instance, in declarative sentences, that adverbs or adverbial phrases may precede the grammatical subject as in:

- (8) a. *Late that afternoon* she received a reply paid telegram . . . (64)
- b. *In one place* Betty saw the remains of the study safe . . . (64)
- c. *Without hesitating* Betty replied . . . (64)
- d. *Then* he went on . . . (65)
- e. *In the meantime* she would be the better of professional aid . . . *An hour later* a pleasant-looking middle-aged woman arrived and took charge. (65)
(all from Freeman Wills Crofts, *Golden Ashes*, Penguin Books, 1959)

These extracts are from a detective novel which constantly thematises time adverbials (as well as others). The direct link between what has gone before and what is asserted in the main clause of the sentence is then the adverbially expressed relationship. In extracts from a travel brochure we find, predictably, more locational adverbials thematised:

- (9) a. *On some islands* it is best if you . . .
 - b. *In Greece and Turkey*, you are met at the airport . . .
 - c. *In all other places* we make bookings . . .
 - d. *At the centres* where we have our own representatives you . . .
 - e. *In some centres* we have local agents . . .
 - f. *On a few islands* you have to collect them yourselves . . .
- (*Aegina Club* brochure 1981, p. 3)

In general it seems reasonable to suggest that the constituent which is thematised in a sentence is, in some sense, 'what the sentence is about', regardless of whether or not the constituent is the grammatical subject. When the grammatical subject is thematised, this seems self-evident. Thus in

- (a) Fred borrowed a hammer from John
- (b) John lent a hammer to Fred

sentence (a) seems to be 'about' *Fred* and (b) seems to be 'about' *John*. Where adverbials of time were thematised, as in the examples (8) above, the sentence seems to be 'about' (or, put differently, to be answering the question) 'what happened next?' We shall discuss the implications of this textual structuring in the next section.

Meanwhile, we should note that there is another set of adverbials which are frequently thematised but which do not contribute to the structure of the discourse in the same way. This set includes what we shall call *metalingual comments* in which the speaker / writer specifically comments on how what he is saying is to be taken. He may comment on the structure of what he is saying: *let me begin by*, *first of all I shall*, *I shall now turn to*, *in conclusion*, *finally*, etc. He may comment on his commitment to belief in what he is saying: *obviously*, *of course*, *clearly* as against *perhaps*, *possibly*, *supposedly*, etc. He may produce one from a large number of expressions which indicate how the recipient is to 'tag' the content in his memory: *in confidence*, *between you and me*, *frankly*, *briefly*, etc. (For an

extended discussion of adverbials of this kind, see Brown & Levinson, 1978.) It is clear that this thematised 'metalingual' comment is not to be integrated with the representation of content which the recipient is constructing. It merely gives him directions, in some cases about the type and structure of mental representation he should be constructing (*Once upon a time* presumably instructs the recipient to construct a fairy-tale model), in some cases about the internal structure of the model (*more importantly*), and sometimes comments on the reliability of what is asserted (*perhaps*).

Sometimes, of course, 'hedges' of this sort are not thematised but inserted within the sentence, or they follow it, as in:

- (10) a. Frankly I don't think he will.
- b. I frankly don't think he will.
- c. I don't think he will, frankly.

It is hard to make judgements on the effect of different placings of adverbials in sentences in isolation. Some hearers feel these variations produce no difference in meaning, others perceive subtle nuances of difference. Like many issues concerning thematisation / linearisation / selection of syntactic structure, this issue is little understood. We shall assume in the rest of our discussion that *theme* is a formal category in the analysis of sentences (or clauses in a complex or compound sentence) and, following Daneš (1974), we shall assume that it has two main functions:

- (i) connecting back and linking in to the previous discourse, maintaining a coherent point of view
- (ii) serving as a point of departure for the further development of the discourse.

4.3 Thematisation and 'staging'

The process of linear organisation which we have been examining, largely at a sentential level in 4.2, produces the same sort of problem for the speaker / writer in organising units larger than the sentence. We may talk in general of **thematisation** as a discursal rather than simply a sentential process. What the speaker or writer puts first will influence the interpretation of everything that follows. Thus a title will influence the interpretation of the text which follows it. The first sentence of the first paragraph will