

## TWO RESEARCH PARADIGMS FOR DISCOURSE ANALYSIS<sup>1</sup>

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### 1.0 COMMON ASSUMPTIONS IN DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Discourse analysis covers a vast range of types of language use, including conversations, monologues of various sorts (lectures, sermons, political speeches), narratives, jokes, and much else in both oral and written modes. It is not surprising, therefore, that quite distinct approaches to discourse have evolved, often with very different research orientations, methodologies, and data sources. In this short contribution, a characterization is offered of two typical research paradigms in discourse analysis. One approach derives primarily from concerns of a sociological and sociolinguistic nature and the other from the perspective of experimental psycholinguistics and cognitive science. The characterization of each includes not only an indication of the major research focus, but also the types of data used, the kinds of questions addressed, the theoretical positions taken, and the overall goals of the research. Finally an indication is offered of the kinds of contributions which can be made by at least one type of discourse analysis to substantial theoretical issues in linguistics.

### 2.0 SOCIOLINGUISTICALLY BASED DISCOURSE

Perhaps the most familiar sort of discourse research is that which focuses primarily on the nature and organization of oral conversations, a tradition represented, for example, in the work of Blakemore (1988), Schiffrin (1988), Stubbs (1983), Tannen (1984) and others. Conversations typically occupy center stage in this research, along with the strategies which participants employ as they initiate, advance, restructure and terminate their social and linguistic interactions. Given such a focus, it is not surprising that the factors investigated in conversational analysis are those associated with the participants themselves, including their age, sex, social status, relative power, degree of familiarity, and social roles. These factors are found to play significant roles in

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<sup>1</sup>A shorter version of the present paper was presented at the 1992 Annual Meeting of the Alberta Conference on Language, Banff, Alberta, November 7, 1992. The research reported here was supported in part by SSHRC Research Grant 410-90-0125. I am grateful to my colleagues John T. Hogan and Lois M. Stanford, as well as to those graduate students who also participated in the project, including especially Elyse Abraham, Ruth Dyck, Andrea Kross, and Yuhuan Wang.

controlling conversations including, for example, the ways in which participants take turns, control conversational topics, guide the thread of developing discourse, change the subject, and even terminate conversations.

A classic example of the sociolinguistics approach to discourse analysis is found in Tannen (1984), in which a Thanksgiving Day dinner is analyzed in considerable detail. Here Tannen taped an extended afternoon dinner party, and while the participants knew that they were being recorded, they were by and large close enough friends that the taping appeared not to bother them. She later transcribed and analyzed the entire session, focussing her attention on such factors as the relative contributions of the participants, the types of turn-taking exhibited, and the ways topics were introduced and controlled. Many aspects of the description depended crucially upon the nature of the individuals' mutual interrelations, which Tannen characterized in her analysis.

The significance of the relative power held by conversational participants is often construed along gender lines (Lakoff, 1975; Kramer, 1978). Fishman (1980), for example, found that women used certain types of hedges five times more often than men, although these were concentrated at points where women unsuccessfully attempted to change the topic. Spender (1980) opines that we have different expectations of male and female language, namely that women speak longer than men, with more instances of tag questions and interruptions. The accuracy of this view has of course often been challenged. For example, Swacker (1975) found that men took on the average five times longer than women to provide oral descriptions of pictures, while O' Barr and Atkins (1980) found, *contra* Lakoff (1975), that the use of hedges, tags, emphatic forms, and "empty" adjectives was governed more by social status and experience than by sex (see also, e.g., Cutler & Scott, 1990; Dubois & Brouch, 1975). Given such results and expectations, it is not surprising to find Leet-Pellegrini (1980), for example, arguing that males tend to dominate and exhibit expertise in conversations, while women gravitate toward supportive roles. Power is revealed within discourse in terms of such factors as who controls topics of conversation and changes in topics, who expresses expertise, who is relatively more assertive, and who assumes a socially dominant role. Such power is manifested strategically by controlling turn-taking, interrupting, and using more assertive language as, for example, the use of direct versus indirect commands.

The discussion above might seem to suggest that conversational analysis has focused primarily on gender studies, but this is emphatically not the case. More recent research dealing with conversational analysis from a sociolinguistic perspective can be found in Duranti and Goodwin (1992) where elaborate attention is paid to the influence of "context" of a linguistic, social, and even cultural nature on the structure and organization of conversations within a variety

of societies. Duranti and Goodwin argue that when the notion of context is extended to encompass linguistic, social, cultural and ritualistic facts, greater attention can be paid to the roles of sociological and cultural factors in the structure of conversation (see, for example, Duranti, 1992; Lindstrom, 1992). Within the same sociological tradition, but differing somewhat from conversational analysis, is the complementary field of the ethnography of speaking (viz. Duranti, 1988), with its emphasis on “communicative competence”, that knowledge which conversational participants both need and actually display as they engage in successful communication (Hymes, 1972). Such research places importance on the ways in which speaking and communicating actually contribute to the structuring of society and of people’s lives.

In short, sociolinguistically based discourse analysis focuses on the sociologically relevant factors and seeks to determine how they contribute to the structure and control of language use. The theories informing such studies are typically those borrowed from sociology and sociolinguistics, and while ethnomethodology plays an important role here (e.g., Schegloff, 1992), other methodologies are also employed, including controlled experiments and studies of formulaic language (viz. Swacker, 1975; Bauman, 1992). Some ethnomethodologists, maintaining that their orientation is different from both conversational analysis and sociolinguistics, insist on a strong cultural focus in their work (e.g., Duranti, 1988). Nevertheless, the sociological variables and their influences on the form of human linguistic interaction remain primary.

### 3.0 COGNITIVELY BASED DISCOURSE ANALYSIS RESEARCH

In contrast to the sociolinguistically oriented studies of discourse, those deriving from a more “purely linguistic” and psycholinguistic tradition tend to focus on the contributions made to the organization and structure of discourse by cognitive and processing factors, with emphasis also placed on the ways in which functional distinctions are morphosyntactically coded. Within this approach, the *forms* of language are examined to determine the effects of both processing factors and syntactic considerations. Consequently, the psycholinguistic approach to discourse analysis tends to be more familiar to linguists, addressing such matters as the choice of syntactic variants, the use of anaphora, the distribution of given and new information, the effects of markedness and iconicity, and similar issues. Pioneering research in this area can be found in the contributions of Grimes (1975), Chafe (1980; 1982), Clark & Clark (1977), and Longacre (1983), while much of the earlier work is integrated in Brown and Yule (1983).

Within this framework, cognitive psychology, experimental psycholinguistics, formal syntax, and even typological research provide theoretical input. An illustration of such eclecticism is found in the contributions of Hopper (1979) and Hopper and Thompson (1980), who addressed from a typological perspective the issue of how transitivity is used to code foreground information. The role of foregrounding in discourse was further explored by Tomlin (1985) from a psycholinguistic perspective and by Givón (1987) from a typological/descriptive point of view.

Similarly, Prince (1981) offered a detailed analysis of the distribution of given and new information, a theme elaborated in Ariel (1985) and further discussed by Prideaux (in press).

The psycholinguistic approach to discourse analysis also attempts to relate processing factors to the organization of discourse. For example, Smyth (1988) examined the constraints imposed by working memory in discourse, while Prideaux (1991) attempted to relate various aspects of Leech's (1983) "textual rhetoric" to processing considerations. With a similar orientation, Chafe (1987) examined cognitive constraints on the flow of information in discourse. Researchers in this area typically exploit a variety of types of data, including experimentally collected oral and written conversations and narratives, as well as written texts, naturalistic observations, and typological data. Within the cognitive approach to discourse analysis, the data sources and methods are somewhat more controlled than is typically the case in ethnomethodological studies.

In one important sense, then, the sociolinguistic approach to discourse tends to focus on those variables which appear to be largely culturally based and, accordingly, under some degree of deliberate control by speakers and hearers. In contrast, the psycholinguistically oriented studies of discourse tend to seek out those factors which are common for biological reasons and, accordingly, are under less deliberate and conscious control of speakers and hearers.

Clearly, however, the two distinct approaches and research methodologies to discourse analysis sketched above are not necessarily mutually exclusive. It is not uncommon to find some studies addressing both social and cognitive variables. Syntheses are possible, and in fact it might even be argued that such collaborative efforts are crucial in sorting out the relative differences played by social and cognitive variables in the structure and organization of discourse. A short example will illustrate the value of such a "mixed" study.

#### 4.0 THE ROLE OF MARKEDNESS IN DISCOURSE

The distinction between marked and unmarked structures dates back at least to the theoretical insights of the Prague School. When two alternative forms are available, the *unmarked* member tends to be prototypical in structure, to exhibit a wider distribution, and to be more frequent than its *marked* counterpart. Psycholinguistically, the unmarked forms are generally easier to process and they also tend to be acquired earlier (Slobin, 1973).

From a functional perspective, Fox (1987) has suggested that marked structures might serve to delimit thematic boundaries in discourse, a view also supported by Givón (1987). One reason marked structures might be used to signal shifts in thematic structure is that since marked structures are unexpected and violate canonical form, they might inhibit processing, thereby providing a natural place for the hearer to integrate accumulated information into the currently

evolving "mental model" (Johnson-Laird, 1983). It is plausible that marked structures could serve the crucial role of flagging a change in topic, episode, or other thematic shift.

If this hypothesis is correct, the relative frequencies of marked and unmarked structures should differ, depending on their location within an extended discourse. In particular, marked structures should be more frequent at thematic boundaries, while their unmarked analogues should be more frequent within the thematic units.

To test this hypothesis against actual discourse data, Prideaux and Hogan (in press) examined pairs of English structures containing main and subordinate adverbial clauses, such as those in (1) below:

- 1a. Classes were cancelled when it snowed.
- 1b. When it snowed, classes were cancelled.

Instances of the first sort, in which the main clause precedes the subordinate clause (MC+SC), are unmarked structures, while those of the second sort (SC+MC) are marked (Clark & Clark, 1977; Givón, 1987). In an experiment, 40 subjects (20 males and 20 females) watched a short film clip and then narrated the events in the film orally to a friend. The narratives were taped for later transcription and analysis. Several independent judges also segmented the film clip into its constituent episodes. All instances in the oral narratives of sentences containing subordinate adverbial clauses were tabulated in terms of their structure (marked or unmarked) and their locations (episode initial or medial). In a second study using the same stimulus materials, 32 participants (16 males and 16 females) were asked to provide written narratives of the same film, and the same structures were examined in the resulting narratives.

When the data were examined to see whether males and females differed in their use of the targeted structures, either in oral or written forms, no significant differences based on the sex of the narrator were found. Moreover, the oral data revealed no significant differences in the numbers of marked and unmarked structures, although a very strong association was found between the position of the structure in an episode and its markedness. In particular, the unmarked structures tended to occur medially and the marked structures initially, just as the hypothesis predicted.

The written data exhibited the same pattern: no gender differences in the use of the targeted structures, and no significant difference in the overall use of marked versus unmarked structures. Again, however, a significant association emerged between the markedness of a structure and its location, with the marked structures-strongly gravitating to episode boundaries and unmarked structures to medial positions.

These results illustrate several related issues in the analysis of discourse data. First, while the issue of markedness derives its importance from linguistic theory, a functional role for the distinction is explored, one which calls upon our (admittedly meagre) knowledge of language processing to provide some insight into how markedness might be employed in extended language use. Second, a methodology familiar from experimental psycholinguistics, a controlled experiment, provides real language data collected under controlled conditions. Such controls permitted an examination of the role of the sex of the speaker in the narratives, and in terms of the factor of markedness, no sex differences emerged.

A third aspect of the study involved an investigation to determine what role, if any, was played by the sex of the speakers in governing such production factors as relative wordiness, and numbers of clauses, pauses, and hedges uttered. While wide individual differences were found across speakers, no significant sex effect emerged in any of these variables. The only sociolinguistic factor which did exhibit significant results was that of same-sex dyads: when a speaker was talking to a friend of the same sex, that speaker tended to be somewhat more verbose than when speaking to a member of the opposite sex or to a stranger.

This brief example illustrates that controlled studies can investigate both sociologically significant variables and those cognitive factors of more immediate interest to linguists and psycholinguists. That is, while the two research paradigms sketched above clearly are distinct, there is nevertheless the possibility that with appropriate planning and organization, data on both types of factors can be extracted and examined independently. And such studies are crucial if the contributions of social, cultural, and cognitive variables to the organization of discourse are to be separated and understood.

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