语言学研究

Linguistic Research

第十辑

北京大学外国语学院外国语言学及应用语言学研究所 编

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语言学理论研究

Text, discourse and information: A systemic-functional overview①

M.A.K. Halliday

Abstract: This paper discusses some important notions in discourse analysis from the systemic-functional perspective. The author begins with the two terms of "text" and "discourse", reviewing briefly the history of discourse analysis. Then he comes to the question of discourse as variation, arguing that we need to distinguish the type of discourse variation associated not with register and genre but with what Bernstein called "code" and that we need the concept not just of "multimodal" discourse but of discourse that is "multisemiotic"; this is followed by a discussion of whether there are "special" types of text (for example, works of literature); and if so, in what sense they are special, and whether the critical feature might be the role of metaphor, lexical or grammatical. The author notices that many scholars who undertake discourse analysis approach the task from a particular angle. A case in point is the approach known as "critical discourse analysis", provoking Jim Martin's counterproposal for "positive discourse analysis". Unlike matter, which has expansion in space, much of meaning cannot be measured; but people seem to hanker for a balance between ideational and interpersonal meaning, which may account for the popularity of interpersonal topics among today's researchers into discourse. In the last section, the author turns to the relation between discourse and technology, bringing out the many-sided role of the computer in discourse analysis, including machine translation.

Key words: discourse analysis; systemic-functional linguistics; information; technology

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❶ Text, discourse, and discourse analysis

1.1　Some years ago I was asked how I would distinguish between "text" and "discourse", or whether I regarded the two terms as synonymous. Text and discourse are the same thing, I said, but being looked at from different points of view; so each term can be used to define the other. "Text" is discourse that is being viewed as (the product of) a process of language; "discourse" is text that is being viewed in its socio-cultural context (cf. Halliday, 2008: 77-78). This means that "discourse" is usually used to refer to passages of more than minimal length; but apart from that constraint, text and discourse are the same phenomenon.

　　In the earlier period of modern European and American linguistics, text remained outside the domain of the theory of language, except for those scholars who studied literature as a linguistic phenomenon, under the heading of "stylistics". J. R. Firth as almost unique among linguists in treating text as the primary object of linguistic study. Those of us who tried to maintain and develop that approach were dismissed by the Chomsky school as being "data-oriented"; the message was that there was no place for the study of text in the context of a theory of language. Sydney Lamb (2004: 49) quotes a remark made by Robert Lees at a meeting of the Linguistic Society of America in 1959: "Isn't it funny", he said, "that some linguists still analyse texts?"

1.2　When text returned into the field of vision, in the work of European scholars such as Wolfgang Dressler and Teun van Dijk, it was first given the name "text linguistics" – often written as a single word "textlinguistics" ori the model of the German Textlinguistik, much of the initiative having come from German or German-speaking linguists (cf. Dressler, ed., 1978). The label implied that it was a separate sub-discipline, within linguistics or perhaps within applied linguistics; it was recognized as such by AILA, the International Association of Applied Linguistics, although still part of the same general field of knowledge. By the early 1980s, however, the term "text linguistics" was on its way out, and "discourse analysis" took over. The multi-authored work edited by Teun van Dijk (1985) was called the *Handbook of Discourse Analysis.*

　　Some early work in text linguistics, including that by van Dijk himself, had been modelled on formal syntax. But the term was not used in systemic-functional linguistics, because the study of text was simply one aspect of linguistics in general; this is clearly set out in Hasan (1978), where she discusses the nature of text in terms of its essential features of "structure" and "texture". The term "discourse analysis", on the other hand, which did not contain the word "linguistics", proclaimed the independence of text studies from linguistics (which by default meant formal linguistics) and set it up as a separate

discipline. This coincided with the influence of "post-modernist" thinking according to which what must be avoided was "totalizing": in this perspective, data was seen as a good thing and general theory was bad. Instead of linguistics, discourse analysis was associated with studies of relevance, plausibility, politeness and numerous other such conceptual frameworks.

1.3   In fact the *Journal of Pragmatics* proclaims its field as "linguistic pragmatics" and states that "By providing possible theoretical foundations for the study of linguistic practice, the journal has helped to extend our knowledge of the forms, functions and foundations of human interaction". The journal "endeavours to narrow the distance between linguistics and ... neighbouring disciplines". Discourse analysis figures as one among seven ("and other") areas of linguistic research, one of which is said to be "general linguistics". (from "Aims and Scope", inside cover of every issue of the *Journal of Pragmatics*)

There has been discussion about the relation between pragmatics and linguistics: are they separate disciplines? is one a part of the other? I am not concerned with that issue. It is clear that there is considerable overlap in what is published in journals under these two headings. What I am concerned with is the activity of discourse analysis. This can be pursued from many standpoints, not all of them "linguistic" in the sense in which I would understand it. To me, a linguistic analysis of discourse implies that the text is being brought into relation with the system of language – that is, it is being described in terms which form part of a general linguistic description of the lexicogrammar and phonology of the language in which it is spoken and/or written. In any discussion of the meaning of the text, such terms have a much greater power than ad hoc categories introduced by way of a kind of running commentary on the text.

❷ Discourse as variation

2.1   Discourse consists of language: language as **instance** (that is, as text), not language as **system**. We talk of "written discourse" and "spoken discourse"; this means that it takes the form of **wording** — language at the lexicogrammatical stratum, which is presented and made accessible to a receiver in either phonic or graphic form. This gives us one basic distinction into two kinds of text, according to the medium in which they are realized. But aside from this obvious dichotomy, it is clear that there is a great deal of variation among different **discourse types**, where a "type" refers to a set of instances all of which have certain features in common. This variation has long been acknowledged in some form or other by those who are engaged in the analysis of discourse.

Variation among types of discourse was referred to in systemic-functional theory as

register variation, which I defined as "variation according to use", to distinguish it from dialect variation which was "according to user" (Halliday, McIntosh & Strevens, 1964). In register variation there is a resetting of the probabilities in some region or regions of the lexicogrammar, setting up patterns with resonate with some aspect of the context. An example would be a higher than average frequency of imperative mood, perhaps with certain types of process, in procedural texts of the instructional kind (cf. Matthiessen et al., 2008: 183 ff.). The term "discourse genre" is widely used for variation of this kind; in systemic-functional contexts this term would be used in particular where the type is characterized by a particular **text structure** — some selection from within the generalized structure potential of the register. Many other terms have been used in the classification of texts: for example, "activity types", where the focus is on the setting, particularly institutional settings like job interviews and court hearings (Sarangi, 2000).

2.2   We need to distinguish here the type of discourse variation associated not with register and genre but with what Bernstein called "code", which he himself expanded to "sociolinguistic coding orientation" (see Hasan, 1973). Code variation is the variation in discourse style that is associated with different groups within a society; for example, country folk may differ from city folk in their characteristic ways of meaning, or the older generation from the younger. This kind of variation has been extensively researched by Ruqaiya Hasan, who shows that (unlike register and genre) codal variation is variation in semantic style. She studied the semantic variation which she found to occur in the talk between mothers and their three-year-old children in a large Australian city. Hasan and her colleague Carmel Cloran, using statistical methods of quantitative analysis, found significant differences in the styles of discourse in the home, along two clearly identified variables: one, the social positioning of the family, whether working class or middle class, based on the degree of workplace autonomy of the main breadwinner; the other, the sex of the child, the talk between mothers and their daughters was very different from the talk between mothers and their sons, though the children were less than four years old (Hasan, 2009).

　　Hasan notes that the notion of context, which is fundamental to all study of discourse, has to be interpreted, in codal variation, rather more "thickly" than is customary in studies of variation in register and genre. The codal variation is not related to the immediate context of situation, what Hasan calls the "material situational setting", but extends as a kind of semantic prosody across all the various activities that may be going on at the time.

2.3   Meanwhile the scope of the term "discourse", as often happens with general terms that are associated with movements in the focus of research – has extended beyond its

original sense as text and now includes material in other symbolic modalities, such as tables, diagrams, figures, graphs, and various types of maps, plans and charts. These are often integrated into the flow of discourse as either supplementary or even complementary to the worded text. For studies in multimodal discourse from a systemic-functional viewpoint, see Lemke (1998), Martinec (2005) including references therein, Baldry & Thibault (2008). There still remains much to be done in interpreting these extra-textual modalities as semiotic systems in their own right. As Matthiessen (2009) has pointed out, we need the concept not just of "multimodal" discourse but of discourse that is multisemiotic.

Systemic-functional theory has provided a conceptual framework for the interpretation of other semiotic systems; for example, Kress & van Leeuwen's study (I think we can now say "classic" study) *Reading Images* (1996), and Michael O'Toole's (1994) brilliant analysis of painting, architecture and sculpture *The Language of Displayed Art*, now appearing in a new and enlarged edition (probably 2011). O'Toole draws on the systemic concepts of stratification, rank and metafunction, raising the fundamental question of how far a functional theory of language can serve as the basis for theoretical studies in the visual arts. The relation between language and music is very different. While there is no analogue of lexicogrammar in music, van Leeuwen (1999) defines "musical meaning" in terms of the kind of action that is needed to produce musical sound; and Caldwell (2010) reports that McDonald (forthcoming) sees music as "embodied meaning potential" and proposes a "bi-stratal, metafunctionally organized model of music as a social semiotic system".

2.4　The other dimension of discourse variation is the cross-linguistic one: discourse can be compared between one language and another. Systemic-functional work in translation has emphasized the complex relation between inter-language variation (variation among different languages) and intra-language variation (variation among different registers within one language) (Teich, 2003; Steiner, 2004; papers in Steiner & Yallop, eds., 2001); multilingual studies of "parallel" texts (texts in different languages that are functionally equivalent) show up regular inter-language differences in the features appearing as characteristic of a particular register (Teich, 1999).

Mattiessen, Teruya and Wu (2008) see multilingual discourse studies as adding a new dimension to discourse analysis, suggesting that a theory-based study of such "texts in context" (multilingual texts, texts in translation and interpreting) contributes both to cross-cultural studies, including the various concerns of cross-cultural pragmatics, and to general linguistic studies such as language comparison and typology, which they consider need to be based on the study of texts. This is a view that will be widely shared by those working in systemic-functional theory, which has never accommodated a distinction between linguistic

theory and text studies, as if data and theory belonged to two separate disciplines.

❸ Special discourses?

3.1   Do we consider that discourse analysis is essentially one and the same operation carried out across all varieties of discourse? The immediate answer must be "yes". If discourse analysis consists in relating the text to the system, as opposed to just relating it to other texts without reference to the system that lies behind them, then that process is the same regardless of the nature and variety of the text.

This question usually arises in the context of **stylistics**: do we need a special form of discourse analysis for literature? Again I will start by giving a direct answer "no". English literature is written in the English language, Chinese literature is written in the Chinese language; otherwise it wouldn't be literature, it would have no meaning, and no mode of expression either. We have to analyze literature first and foremost as language, not in terms of some esoteric categories invented for this special purpose.

That said, however, it does not mean that literary texts have no special features of their own. Of course, certain literary genres have their own special conventions; but that is true of other, non-literary genres as well. What then distinguishes a work of verbal art? Widdowson (2000: 162) comments that "In literature, the text does not mediate between first and second person parties...The reader engages *with* the text but cannot participate in interaction with the writer *through* the text". It might be argued that this applies to every text being read by people unknown to the writer. Hasan suggests that what distinguishes a work of verbal art is the extra level of articulation in its semantics. As Hasan explains: there is a level of **symbolic articulation**, the pattern of meanings as realized in the lexicogrammar; and, beyond that, a level of **theme**, the deeper, more general and abstract motif, or complex of motifs, that is itself realized in the symbolic articulation (Hasan, 1985). So while literature does not demand special techniques of lexicogrammatical analysis, literary stylistics does stand out as a distinct subdiscipline within the general field of discourse studies, as embodied in the work of Zhang Delu (Zhang, 1998).

3.2   As a general rule there is nothing very special about the lexicogrammar of a literary text; the notion of literature as "deviant" language, popular for a time among the early transformational linguists, was itself a deviation from the broad tradition of literary studies. But there is one feature that stands out in some genres of literature, particularly of poetry, namely the prevalence of metaphor. This is metaphor in its traditional sense, of lexical metaphor; and we could see this as a kind of indexical feature, with the suggestion that "this is the kind of text where the wordings (and therefore the first level meanings) are not

to be taken only at their face value". That after all is what metaphor is all about. In other words, the use of metaphor is perhaps itself a metaphor for the way meaning is construed in the text. And this might suggest to us that **grammatical metaphor** also carries some such message.

Grammatical metaphor is a characteristic feature of scientific texts; and here too there is something special going on. In some ways, scientific text (perhaps we might call it "verbal science", by analogy with verbal art) does resemble literature, except that the double articulation is not that of first order meaning (symbolic articulation) with theme, but rather that of first order meaning with theory. Verbal science and verbal art are both concerned with the more abstract construal of human experience; but they arrive at it by different routes – and it is not such a very long time since the two diverged. (Halliday, 1987, in CW2, 2002).

Both verbal science and verbal art can be analysed linguistically as text; and both depend on the double articulation at the semantic stratum. But there are of course significant differences between them. Whereas in science it depends on the specialist knowledge of the reader whether or not they are able to construe some underlying theme in the text (i.e. the theory), in literature it depends more on the reader's acumen, and their willingness to stop and think, which in turn is related to their experience in reading literature.

3.3   Metaphoric discourse tends to gain a high social prestige. There are two reasons for this, though the two are of course related: it is somewhat exotic, compared with the language everyday life; and its functional roles, and the roles of those who produce it, carry a more than ordinary social value.

So it tends to be extended to other social contexts. Advertizers of consumer goods and real estate favour a more literary mode, as do those who build up the images of people who are prominent, or to be made prominent, in public life. But in a highly technologized society, science tends to be valued more highly than literature: in the discourse of bureaucracy, and in the workings of the big corporations, what predominates is grammatical metaphor, and this then finds its way into all the organs of the media. But while in a scientific or technical text, grammatical metaphor fulfils specific discourse functions, creating taxonomies of highly-charged technical concepts, and building up complex sequences of logical argument, in other contexts it has no discursive function, other than the socio-political function of symbolizing, and in that way exercising power.

④ **Power of discourse; discourse of power**

4.1   An interesting feature of discourse analysis (and one that might serve to distinguish