

Discourse and Context in Language Teaching

A Guide for Language Teachers

Marianne Celce-Murcia
Elite Olshtain



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TO OUR BELOVED GRANDCHILDREN
KYLE, SCOTT, DANIELLE, AND JOEL
EDAN, AVIV, ROY, AND MAI

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PART I

BACKGROUND

CHAPTER I

Introduction to Discourse Analysis

"The analysis of discourse is, necessarily, the analysis of language in use. As such, it cannot be restricted to the description of linguistic forms independent of the purposes or functions which those forms are designed to serve in human affairs."

(Brown and Yule, 1983:1)

"... one must learn more than just the pronunciation, the lexical items, the appropriate word order, ... one must also learn the appropriate way to use those words and sentences in the second language."

(Gass and Selinker, 1994:182)

INTRODUCTION

This chapter and the next one provide a foundation for the framework we present in this book – a framework in which both discourse and context are crucial to effective language teaching. Chapter 1 deals with **discourse**, which refers primarily to the language forms that are produced and interpreted as people communicate with each other. Chapter 2 deals with **pragmatics** (i.e., context and its various features), which deals primarily with the social, cultural, and physical aspects of the situations that shape how people communicate with each other. Another way of looking at this distinction is to say that Chapter 1 deals primarily with textual aspects of messages whereas Chapter 2 deals primarily with the situational aspects of messages.

Sometimes it is hard to draw the line between text and context since the same forms may be used to signal important information in either domain. A good example of this is the referential use of demonstratives in English (e.g., *this*, *that*). Consider the following examples:

1. Child (pointing at food on the plate in front of him): *What's this?*
2. *Claude thinks we should postpone the picnic. What do you think of this?*

In the first example, the referent of *this* is the food on the child's plate. The referent is clear because the child is physically pointing to what he is talking about. We call this situational (or deictic) reference, which is part of context. In the second example, the referent of *this* is an idea previously mentioned in the ongoing discourse "we should postpone the picnic." We refer to this type of reference as textual (or anaphoric) reference because we find the referent in the prior text.

In addition, pragmatic analysis would take language variation in use into account. For instance, in the first example the speaker is a child talking at home, a circumstance under which the question "What's this?" is appropriate. An adult guest invited to dinner would not ask the question this way since it might be insulting to the host, so the guest might instead say something like: "What's this new dish you're serving?" In addition to interlocutor-related factors such as age and social relationship, communicative factors such as politeness and appropriacy are also relevant to pragmatic analysis and need to be part of one's overall communicative competence. Language teaching, therefore, must be concerned with how both the discourse itself and the overall context contribute to communication.

HUMAN COMMUNICATION

Human communication fulfills many different goals at the personal and social levels. We communicate information, ideas, beliefs, emotions, and attitudes to one another in our daily interactions, and we construct and maintain our positions within various social contexts by employing appropriate language forms and performing speech activities to ensure solidarity, harmony, and cooperation – or to express disagreement or displeasure, when called for. The acquisition of communication skills in one's first language is a lifelong process, but the basic skills are acquired quite early in life. When learning another language, we have to add to, change, and readjust our native language strategies to fit the new language and culture.

Whether we teach "language for communication" or "language as communication" (Widdowson, 1984:215), it is imperative that we combine knowledge of the target language with skills and strategies that enable us to use the language effectively and appropriately in various social and cultural contexts. This book is intended to help teachers develop frameworks of knowledge and decision-making processes that take recent thinking in discourse analysis into account (from both the linguistic and sociocultural perspectives).

We have written this book to provide language teachers' with a discourse perspective on the language areas they are traditionally prepared to teach: pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary. These areas are indeed the resources of any language and must be part of a language teacher's knowledge. However, when language is used for communication, these areas are resources for creating and interpreting discourse in context, not language systems to be taught or learned out of context for their own sake.

When language is used for communication, the coparticipants typically employ one or more skills simultaneously: listening, reading, speaking, or writing. They often switch quickly from one role and skill to another (e.g., from listening to speaking and back to listening again), or they are engaged in a task that involves carrying out several skills simultaneously (e.g., listening and note taking/writing). The language produced interactively by such coparticipants is discourse (i.e., language in use). We thus agree with Cook (1989), who claims that discourse analysis is useful for drawing attention to the language skills (i.e., listening, reading, speaking, writing), which put users' knowledge of phonological, grammatical, and lexical resources into action whenever language users achieve successful communication.

WHAT IS DISCOURSE?

There are two types of definitions traditionally given for the term “discourse.” Formal definitions typically characterize discourse as a unit of coherent language consisting of more than one sentence; functional definitions characterize discourse as language in use (Schiffrin, 1994). Taken alone, both of these definitions are deficient. A piece of discourse in context can consist of as little as one or two words, as in “Stop” or “No Smoking.” Alternatively, a piece of discourse can consist of hundreds of thousands of words as in the case of a very long novel. Usually, a piece of discourse falls somewhere in between these two extremes. The notion of “sentence” is not always relevant – especially when we consider spoken discourse. Likewise, the phrase “language in use” is so general that it can be almost meaningless. It presupposes that we know what “language” consists of and that a piece of discourse is an instance of putting elements of language to use.

The most satisfying definition of discourse is one that combines these two perspectives: A piece of discourse is an instance of spoken or written language that has describable internal relationships of form and meaning (e.g., words, structures, cohesion) that relate coherently to an external communicative function or purpose and a given audience/interlocutor. Furthermore, the external function or purpose can only be properly determined if one takes into account the context and participants (i.e., all the relevant situational, social, and cultural factors) in which the piece of discourse occurs. Using a language entails the ability to both interpret and produce discourse in context in spoken and written communicative interaction, which is why we assign such a central role to discourse in our discussion of frameworks that should inform language teaching.

WHAT IS DISCOURSE ANALYSIS?

Discourse analysis is minimally the study of language in use that extends beyond sentence boundaries. It started to attract attention from a variety of disciplines in the late 1960s and through the 1970s. At least two terms came to be used in parallel fashion: **text linguistics**, which focused on written texts from a variety of fields and genres, and **discourse analysis**, which entailed a more cognitive and social perspective on language use and communication exchanges and which included spoken as well as written discourse.

Although today discourse analysis can be considered a well-defined discipline on its own, it is closely linked with a number of other disciplines and could, in fact, serve as an umbrella term for a variety of approaches. Ethnography of communication, from the sociological or anthropological point of view, for instance, is language analysis of communicative behavior and of its role within given social contexts. Within linguistics, discourse analysis has taken at least two different paths: one is the extension of grammatical analysis to include functional objectives and the other is the study of institutionalized language use within specific cultural settings (Bhatia, 1993:3–4). The former, which is theoretical in nature, can often be related to a particular school of linguistic analysis such as formal linguistics (e.g., van Dijk’s text linguistics) or systemic linguistics (e.g., Bhatia’s genre analysis); the latter is more concerned with describing actual communication within institutionalized contexts (e.g., doctor-patient interaction, legal contracts).¹ More general discourse analysis investigates everyday conversation, written discourse of all types, narrative, and other kinds of written or spoken texts. In this book, we have adopted Östman and Virtanen’s (1995) position on discourse analysis, which is to regard it “as an umbrella-term for all issues that have been dealt with in the linguistic study of text and discourse.”²

Another important aspect of discourse analysis is that of application. Thus, many discourse studies have been motivated by concern with language teaching, with speech analysis, with the writing or reading process, and with genre and register analyses. It is these different types of **applied discourse analysis** that are most relevant to the aims of this book and will therefore be addressed in subsequent chapters. It is also these different types of applied discourse analysis that have led to a general movement within language pedagogy, which moves from focus on **grammar** to concern with **discourse** and also moves away from language analysis, as the goal of language teaching, to the goal of teaching language for communication. The present book is designed to help the teacher make this transition.

It is not our purpose here to survey comprehensively all the various approaches to discourse analysis; however, the number of different approaches that scholars are currently pursuing explains in part the amorphous nature of discourse analysis today. This makes it difficult for us to define discourse analysis with precision. However, we will illustrate and make reference to different types of discourse analysis in the chapters that follow. These examples and our discussions of them will give the reader an evolving sense of what discourse analysis is. We see no problem with this approach, given that discourse analysis is currently a developing area in linguistics and related disciplines (anthropology, sociology, psychology, and philosophy). This is why we believe we should work with a fluid and contingent definition of discourse analysis.

TYPES OF DISCOURSE

There are many different ways to classify discourse. One dimension is the written/spoken distinction resulting in *written* or *spoken* texts. Both types of text can be further distinguished according to **register** (level of formality) or **genre** (communicative purpose, audience, and conventionalized style and format). Also, some discourse is largely *monologic* (where one speaker or writer produces an entire discourse with little or no interaction) while other discourse is *dialogic* or *multiparty* in nature (where two or more participants interact and – to varying degrees – construct the discourse together).

The distinction made between speech and writing is often referred to as **channel** (Hymes, 1968) or **medium**, due to the fact that a different physiological process is involved in each. Yet it is clear that we can have written language that is intended to be spoken and spoken language that is designed to be read (or which was first spoken and then written down). These distinctions further interact with register and genre as can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. The Oral-literacy Continuum		
CHANNEL LITERACY	SPOKEN	WRITTEN
orate	e.g., conversation	e.g., informal letters, drama, poetry
literate	e.g., lectures, sermons, speeches	e.g., expository essays, articles

Discourse can also be either *planned* or *unplanned* (Ochs, 1979). Unplanned discourse includes most conversations and some written texts such as informal notes and letters. Planned discourse includes prepared speeches or sermons in oral discourse and carefully edited or published written work. The dimension of discourse planning could be added to the features of Table 1.

Most everyday interactions, whether written (e.g., notes, shopping lists, ads, etc.) or spoken, take place in familiar situations. The interlocutors rely heavily on social convention and contextual information. This type of discourse is considered context-embedded and is probably most relevant to the *orated/spoken* and some *orated/written* types of discourse. On the other hand, most instances of written discourse and some examples of spoken discourse are removed from the immediate physical context and handle their topic(s) at a more abstract and conceptual level. This type of discourse is context-reduced, and users of such discourse need to rely more heavily on their knowledge of the language code and genre types because the context is partly unfamiliar, less immediate, and less accessible. This type of discourse is characteristic of literate spoken and written texts. Often planned discourse is context-reduced while unplanned discourse is context-embedded. Educated, proficient language users are able to use with flexibility and appropriacy both planned and unplanned and context-embedded and context-reduced discourse.

Discourse has also been described as **transactional** versus **interactional** (Brown and Yule, 1983), where transactional discourse involves primarily the transmission of information or the exchange of goods and services, and interactional discourse is those instances of language use that shape and maintain social relations and identities and express the speaker's/writer's attitude toward the topic or toward the interlocutor(s). In this book we treat both transactional discourse, where the management of new and old information is often salient, and interactional discourse, where the turn-taking system of the target language and the realization patterns of its speech acts and stance markers can be crucial.

With the exception of spoken versus written discourse, most of these different discourse types represent continua rather than hard and fast dichotomies. For example, a conversation where one speaker dominates can be somewhat monologic, and a letter to a friend can exhibit both interactional and transactional features. A proficient language user develops the knowledge and the skill to manipulate the different types and purposes of discourse according to his/her needs. This entails knowledge of language, of discourse, of writing and speaking conventions, of sociocultural norms as well as other more specific areas of knowledge. The various chapters in this book address many of these knowledge types.

REGISTER AND GENRE IN DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Discourse is frequently studied from the perspective of register or genre. Discourse registers usually reflect the level of formality or informality of an instance of discourse or its degree of technical specificity versus general usage. A genre, on the other hand, is a culturally and linguistically distinct form of discourse such as narrative (e.g., a story), exposition (e.g., a research report), procedural discourse (e.g., a recipe), and so on.³

According to Swales (1981, 1985, 1990) and Bhatia (1993), "a genre is a recognizable communicative event characterized by a set of communicative purpose(s) identified and mutually understood by the members of the professional or academic community in which it regularly occurs" (Bhatia, 1993:13). Both authors emphasize the communicative purpose of the text as the most important feature related to genre. It is this communicative purpose that shapes the genre and gives it internal structure.

Register, as already mentioned, reflects the degree of formality of the particular text by using a characteristic set of lexical and grammatical features that are compatible with the particular register. A lower register is represented by the use of more colloquial (orate) and everyday-type vocabulary and fewer complex grammatical forms while a higher register requires the use of lexical items that are professional or academic in nature along with denser grammatical structures, resulting in a more literate spoken or written text.

FIELDS OF STUDY WITHIN DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

A number of research areas within discourse analysis have received particular attention and have become significant areas of investigation in their own right. With respect to considerations relevant to language teaching, we will briefly discuss five such areas: cohesion, coherence, information structure and conversation analysis (with focus on turn-taking), and critical discourse analysis.

COHESION

The use of various cohesive ties to explicitly link together all the propositions in a text results in **cohesion** of that text. The most obvious structural features of such connected discourse are the cohesive ties identified and discussed by Halliday and Hasan (1976, 1989). There are four types of grammatical ties (reference, ellipsis, substitution, and conjunction) as well as a variety of lexical ties, which we discuss in greater detail in Chapters 4 and 5. The following brief text exhibits synonymous repetition as one textual feature of cohesion that creates *lexical ties*:

Natural beauty plays a starring role in Santa Monica, and seaside is the perfect vantage from which to watch the performance. Early risers will notice that the show begins just after sunrise.

(*Santa Monica Official Visitors Guide*, 1998:18)

In this text the same event is referred to with three different noun phrases: “a starring role” (first mention; new information; use of an indefinite article); “the performance” (the use of the definite article indicates anaphoric reference to an earlier mention, and the semantic information relates this lexical item to “starring role”); and “the show” (the third reference made to the same event, which functions here as a synonym for “the performance”). This example may seem to display a complicated system of lexical ties and reference, but such lexical connections are very common in English writing.

In the following excerpt from a letter written by a mother asking for advice on dealing with pre-teens, there are some examples of *grammatical cohesive ties*:

I am a working mother with two pre-teens. After dropping them off at school, I have to get right to work. But my children are disorganized and always late. A few times, I have had to turn around and go back home because one or the other forgot something.

(*Children-LA's Best Calendar of Family Events*, July 1998:12)

The use of the pronoun *them* in the first line is an anaphoric reference to “two pre-teens.” The conjunction *but*, which begins the second sentence, expresses the counter-expectation arising from the second and third sentences. The phrase “always late” is an elliptical form of the clause “they are always late” and the phrase *one or the other* is a

good example of ellipsis at the noun phrase level meaning "one child or the other child." Had the writer produced *the other one* instead of *the other* we would also have had an example of substitution in this text, *one* would have substituted for *child* (somewhat awkwardly in this context). Of course, there is also lexical cohesion in this text, most obviously in the repetition of *working* and *work* in lines 1 and 2; *children* refers back to *pre-teens* and also relates more indirectly to *mother*. The words *school* and *home* are semantically related items as are *disorganized* and *forgot something*. The cohesion of the text is a result of all these cohesive ties, which link together the words and propositions occurring in the text.

COHERENCE

In addition to cohesion, which is expressed via language resources, or **bottom-up** connections in text, effective discourse also requires **coherence**, which can be viewed as part of **top-down** planning and organization. Coherence contributes to the unity of a piece of discourse such that the individual sentences or utterances hang together and relate to each other. This unity and relatedness is partially a result of a recognizable organizational pattern for the propositions and ideas in the passage, but it also depends on the presence of linguistic devices that strengthen global unity and create local connectedness. Recognizable patterns may include those based on temporal or spatial relations or those based on semantically associated relations such as problem-solution or cause-effect. Coherence may also depend in part on patterns and strategies of text development that are very culture specific.

While the overall coherence of a longer passage depends on the presence of a conventional scheme or organization that is recognizable as generic or specific to a particular communicative purpose and discourse community, the overall coherence of such a passage also depends on the degree of coherence within each paragraph or section of the text. Each sentence or utterance is related both to the previous and following sentences in ways that lead the reader toward an easier and more effective interpretation of the text.

The notion of coherence applies to all four chapters in Part III of this handbook since the ability to use top-down information and strategies to interpret discourse (when listening or reading) or to produce discourse (when writing or speaking) assumes an understanding of the discourse community's assumptions – as well as a degree of control over its language conventions. These are some of the things that constitute coherence in the target discourse community. We shall be discussing more factors contributing to coherence later in Chapters 7 (Reading) and 8 (Writing).

INFORMATION STRUCTURE

The major concern of the area of discourse analysis referred to as **information structure** is the presentation of "old" (known) information versus "new" (unknown) information. Languages use grammatical and discourse features in order to indicate which bits of information are known and which are new. European researchers often use the terms **theme** and **rheme**, while in North America **topic** and **comment** are more common. It seems that the basic principle for information structure is that *themes/topics* (old information) generally precede *rhemes/comments* (new information) in order of presentation.

In spoken discourse, old or given information is frequently recoverable from the situation. In written discourse, grammatical and discourse features play an important role in making this distinction (the use of determiners, pronouns, word order in the sentence). Propositions within a larger piece of discourse also involve more local considerations of "well formedness." According to Bardovi-Harlig (1990), a sentence within a passage functions at three levels: the syntactic, the semantic, and the pragmatic. In order to understand her definitions, we need to better understand the terms "topic" and "comment."

A topic is a discourse entity that connects one part of the discourse to other parts through continuity in given information (i.e., old or known information) that runs through the entire discourse and helps us understand what is being discussed. Thus, if there is a main character in the passage and most of the sentences are about that person, the identification of the main character will be known information and various grammatical and lexical devices will be used to connect the sentences through references to the main character, such as in the following text about Rona:

Rona was the youngest of three sisters. She liked music and literature.
Being the youngest sister was in some ways a blessing and in others
a curse. . . .

In this example all noninitial references to Rona point back to her initial mention and link the topic of subsequent sentences in the discourse back to the initial mention.

The comment, on the other hand, is what is said about the topic and that is generally new or added information. In each sentence of the example some additional information is added in the comment, developing the discourse according to the writer's intention. In the text "being the youngest of three sisters" and "liking music and literature" are comments about Rona. The terms "topic" and "comment" relate to the textual function of managing new information (comments) and old information (topics). Ties of grammatical and lexical cohesion often provide the glue needed for such information management.

In the example about Rona, the topic of the text is also the subject of the first sentence, so its initial position is part of the normal (or unmarked) rules of English grammar. However, as we shall discuss in more detail in Chapters 4 (Grammar) and 8 (Writing), special grammatical constructions may be used to bring forward elements that would not be found in initial position in the usual discourse sequence. The passage might have continued as follows:

For example, there was less responsibility involved in being the
youngest. The most important tasks were assigned to Rona's
older sisters.

Here the grammatical subject "there" follows an introductory conjunctive tie ("for example") and allows new information ("less responsibility") to function as the marked topic of the first new sentence while the noun phrase "the most important tasks" is both the subject and topic of the next sentence, amplifying on "less responsibility." "Rona" has temporarily become part of the two comments (involved in being the youngest/were assigned to Rona's sisters) for a stretch of discourse before she once again has the potential to become the topic.

Thus understanding how information is managed at the local level can help contribute to coherence at the global level. The three subfields of discourse analysis presented here were chosen to illustrate textual features of discourse that are relevant to language teaching. The next subfield to be discussed here is relevant to conversational exchanges, and the last describes a special subfield dedicated to exposing social inequality in language.

TURN-TAKING IN CONVERSATION ANALYSIS

In conversation, in addition to managing new and old information in a coherent way, the interlocutors also have to take stock of and constantly monitor each other to control the **turn-taking** system of the target language in question since this is another feature of discourse in oral interaction. The conversational turn-taking system (Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson, 1974) of any language includes conventions governing matters such as the

following: how conversations open and close, who speaks when and for how long, who can interrupt (and how this is done), how topics get changed, how much time can elapse between turns or between speakers, whether or not speakers can overlap, and whether or not speakers can complete or repair each other's utterances. There are often important cultural (and subcultural) differences in the way discourse communities do turn-taking. A lack of understanding of these differences can cause problems in cross-cultural communication.

One important source of organization in the turn-taking system is the "adjacency pair," where the first speaker says something that conventionally requires of the interlocutor a response that is often partly predictable. Thus a typical adjacency pair for a conventional greeting to open a conversation in English might be:

- 1: Hello, how are you?
- 2: Fine, thanks.

Other adjacency pairs often have at least two conventional options. If the first part of the pair is an invitation, the second part can be an acceptance or a refusal. If the first part of the pair is a request for confirmation, the second part can confirm or disconfirm:

- 1: You're from Manchester?
- 2: Yes. / No, Liverpool.

In any given speech community such adjacency pairs can have highly conventionalized and formulaic phrases associated with them. Needless to say, mastering these conventions and phrases in a second language will contribute greatly to oral fluency and communicative competence. We shall have more to say about this in Chapter 9 (Speaking).

CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

The primary interest of **critical discourse analysis** is to deconstruct and expose social inequality as expressed, constituted, and legitimized through language use – notably in the public media such as newspapers, radio, television, films, cartoons, and the like, but also in settings such as classrooms, courtrooms, news interviews, doctor-patient interactions, as well as in everyday talk. Critical discourse analysts believe that discourse tends to become normative with repeated use and thus appears to be neutral; however, in actual fact, discourse is never neutral. It must thus be analyzed in terms of the political ideology, social history, and power structures that it embodies and expresses, explicitly or indirectly. The research of critical discourse analysts often takes on a problem-posing/problem-solving quality and addresses discriminatory use of language directed at women, lower socioeconomic classes, members of ethnic, racial, religious, and linguistic minorities, and others. Critical discourse analysts also may suggest remedies in the form of nondiscriminatory behaviors and language practices that could replace the problematic discourse. Some critical discourse analysts who are well known to language educators are Fairclough (1995), Pennycook (1995), and Phillipson (1992).

Many critical discourse analysts believe that education in general and foreign and second language education in particular are ideological and political, but that most language teachers are unaware of this. They argue that discourse in the language classroom as well as the discourse of language textbooks and teaching materials are all in need of critical examination to ensure that discourse that is discriminatory and that reinforces social inequality be avoided to the extent that this is possible, or – at the very least – explicitly and critically discussed if it comes up.

In our experience, language teachers who are exposed to the writings and ideas of critical discourse analysts tend either to relate strongly to this theoretical and analytical approach or to be quite put off by it since it represents a sociopolitical (or ideological)