

SECTION FOUR

Discourse

Here we take up for further elaboration the theme of discourse description introduced in Section Two. The first paper (Paper 7) shows how the distinction between text and discourse emerges from a consideration of different approaches to the description of language in use. In the paper that follows there is a similar examination of different approaches to linguistic description, but this time in reference to the problem of translation equivalence.

Both of these papers refer back to Section Two in that they develop the discourse theme and take up once more the question of the universality of scientific discourse in particular. But they also refer forward to the papers which follow in this section. Paper 7 does so in postulating two types of relationship beyond the sentence: cohesion, defined as the overt structural link between sentences as formal items, and coherence, defined as the link between the communicative acts that sentences are used to perform. Paper 8 prepares for the papers which follow by working out the difference between the surface forms of sentences and their semantic and pragmatic values.

Paper 9 explores these questions further as part of a general survey of approaches to discourse description. The semantic value of sentences is now interpreted as the propositions they are used to express and their pragmatic value as their illocutionary function. Cohesion, it is suggested, is the propositional relation, and coherence the illocutionary relation between parts of a discourse.

As always, of course, such neat equations and clear cut divisions give only the illusion of truth: they impose a convenient clarity on complex matters for the purposes of further investigation. In the case of cohesion and coherence, for example, they serve as points of reference whereby other problems can be put into perspective: how propositional and illocutionary development in discourse interrelate and reinforce each other, how the language user draws on his knowledge of rules to make sense in the actual process of interpretation, and so on. These, and other problems are introduced, but left unresolved, in the last part of Paper 9, which gives some indication of the expanse of terrain that has yet to be explored.

86 Explorations in Applied Linguistics

The question of the relationship between rules that people know and the procedures they use is discussed in some detail, but with appropriate tentativeness, in the last paper in this section, which therefore moves the inquiry naturally on to the theme that is central to the section that follows.

7 Directions in the teaching of discourse

The purpose of this paper is to suggest that there is a need to take discourse into account in our teaching of language, and to consider how far the attempts made by linguists and others to analyse discourse might help us to do this. In this paper I shall be concerned exclusively with English and with English teaching, but I believe that what I have to say has a more general application.

I think it is true to say that, in general, language teachers have paid little attention to the way sentences are used in combination to form stretches of connected discourse. They have tended to take their cue from the grammarian and have concentrated on the teaching of sentences as self-contained units. It is true that these are often presented in 'contexts' and strung together in dialogues and reading passages, but these are essentially settings to make the formal properties of the sentences stand out more clearly—properties which are then established in the learner's mind by means of practice drills and exercises. Basically, the language teaching unit is the sentence as a formal linguistic object. The language teacher's view of what constitutes knowledge of a language is essentially the same as Chomsky's: a knowledge of the syntactic structure of sentences, and of the transformational relations which hold between them. Sentences are seen as paradigmatically rather than syntagmatically related. Such a knowledge 'provides the basis for actual use of language by the speaker-hearer' (Chomsky 1965: 9). The assumption that the language teacher appears to make is that once this basis is provided, then the learner will have no difficulty in dealing with the actual use of language: that is to say, that once the competence is acquired, performance will take care of itself.

There is a good deal of evidence to suggest that this assumption is of very doubtful validity indeed. It has been found, for example, that students entering higher education with the experience of six or more years of instruction in English at the secondary school, have considerable difficulty coping with language in its normal communicative use. So long as language is taught in a vacuum, as a set of skills which have no immediate utility, it is possible to believe that one is providing for some future use by developing a stock of grammatical competence which will be immediately converted into adequate performance when the need arises. It is only

when language teaching has to be geared to specific communicative purposes that doubts as to the validity of this belief begin to arise. In many parts of the world the teaching of English has assumed the crucial auxiliary role of providing the means for furthering specialist education, and here it has become plain that a knowledge of how the language functions in communication does not automatically follow from a knowledge of sentences. This role for English requires a new orientation to its teaching.

What this orientation amounts to is a change of focus from the sentence as the basic unit in language teaching to the use of sentences in combination. Once we accept the need to teach language as communication, we can obviously no longer think of language in terms only of sentences. We must consider the nature of discourse, and how best to teach it. Language teaching materials have in the past been largely derived from the products of theoretical sentence grammars. We now need materials which derive from a description of discourse; materials which will effect the transfer from grammatical competence, a knowledge of sentences, to what has been called communicative competence (Hymes 1970, Campbell and Wales 1970), a knowledge of how sentences are used in the performance of communicative acts of different kinds. Grammatical competence remains in a perpetual state of potentiality unless it is realized in communication. As Hymes puts it 'There are rules of use without which the rules of grammar would be useless' (Hymes 1970: 14). We might hope, as applied linguists, that theoretical studies of discourse might indicate the nature of such rules, and give us some clues as to how we might approach teaching them.

I have referred to discourse as the use of sentences in combination. This is a vague definition which conveniently straddles two different, if complementary, ways of looking at language beyond the sentence. We might say that one way is to focus attention on the second part of my definition: *sentences in combination*, and the other to focus on the first part: *the use of sentences*. I think it is important, from the applied linguistic point of view, to keep these two approaches distinct, though, as we shall see later, linguists have recently attempted to conflate them.

The study of discourse in terms of the combination or interconnection of sentences is, of course, exemplified in the work of Harris. 'Language', he observes, 'does not occur in stray words or sentences, but in connected discourse' (Harris 1952: 357), and he sets out to discover what the nature of this connection might be by applying his well-tried distributional method. By means of transformational adjustments to surface forms, he is able to establish equivalence classes of morphemes and to show that

in many cases two otherwise different sentences contain the same combination of equivalence classes, even though they may contain different combinations of morphemes.

Harris 1952: 373.

He is thereby able to discover a patterning in the discourse in terms of chains of equivalences. What he does, then, is to reduce different message forms to make them correspond to a common code pattern. The fact that the variation in the message form may have some significant communicative value is for him irrelevant. His concern is not to characterize discourse as communication, but to use it to exemplify the operation of the language code in stretches of text larger than the sentence. He himself recognizes the limited scope of his analysis:

All this, however, is still distinct from an *interpretation* of the findings, which must take the meanings of morphemes into consideration and ask what the author was about when he produced the text. Such interpretation is obviously quite separate from the formal findings, although it may follow closely in the directions which the formal findings indicate.

Harris 1952: 382.

The notion that an understanding of the nature of discourse as communication may be dependent on a prior formal account is a significant one, pointing as it does towards a fundamental problem in linguistic description which has to do with the distinction I have made between the two approaches to the analysis of discourse. The notion is a common one among linguists of the transformational-generative persuasion. Thus, Chomsky himself states:

There seems to be little reason to question the view that investigation of performance will proceed only so far as understanding of underlying competence permits.

Chomsky 1965: 10.

The belief is that a native speaker's knowledge of the sentences of his language can be accounted for in terms of invariant rules of an algebraic kind. It is assumed that once the 'correct' grammar consisting of such rules is written, it will provide a basis for the study of performance as a whole, including the study of language in its social contexts of use. There have been objections to this neat isolation of competence as representing the sole concern of the linguist. Hymes (1970) and Labov (1970), for example, have suggested that it is likely that an adequate description of the formal operation of language is dependent on an investigation into certain aspects of performance, and recent developments in generative grammar in fact give strong support to this suggestion. It is significant in the light of Harris's implication of the primacy of formal analysis that Labov should point to discourse analysis as being the very area of inquiry where such primacy cannot be established:

There are some areas of linguistic analysis in which even the first steps towards the basic invariant rules cannot be taken unless the social context of the speech event is considered. The most striking examples are in the analysis of discourse.

Labov 1970: 206–207.

Since Harris has taken a considerable number of steps in the description of discourse, the question naturally arises as to how he has managed to do this without considering speech events and social contexts at all. The answer is, of course, that whereas Harris conceives of discourse in purely formal terms as a series of connected sentences, Labov is thinking of the way language forms are used to perform social actions:

Commands and refusals are actions; declaratives, interrogatives, imperatives are linguistic categories—things that are said, rather than things that are done. The rules we need will show how things are done with words and how one interprets these utterances as actions: in other words, relating what is done to what is said and what is said to what is done. This area of linguistics can be called 'discourse analysis'; but it is not well-known or developed. Linguistic theory is not yet rich enough to write such rules, for one must take into account such sociological, non-linguistic categories as roles, rights and obligations.

Labov 1969: 54–55.

Harris's work, well-known though it is, gets no mention; and it is clear that by this definition it has nothing to do with discourse analysis at all. We are confronted, then, with two quite different kinds of inquiry both contending for the same name. A terminological distinction seems to be called for. I propose that the investigation into the formal properties of a piece of language, such as is carried out by Harris, should be called *text analysis*. Its purpose is to discover how a text exemplifies the operation of the language code beyond the limits of the sentence, text being roughly defined, therefore, as *sentences in combination*. Changing the name of Harris's kind of inquiry is to some degree justified by the fact that he himself seems to use the terms *text* and *discourse* interchangeably, as in the following quotation:

... the formal features of the discourses can be studied by distributional methods within the text.

Harris 1952: 357.

We may now use the label *discourse analysis* to refer to the investigation into the way sentences are put to communicative use in the performing of social actions, discourse being roughly defined, therefore, as *the use of sentences*. Having distinguished these two areas of inquiry, I want now to

consider what value their respective findings might have for the teaching of language both as text and as discourse. If we are to teach language in use, we have to shift our attention from sentences in isolation to the manner in which they combine in text on the one hand, and to the manner in which they are used to perform communicative acts in discourse on the other. What help can we get from the theorists?

Text analysis is exemplified most obviously by Harris. It is also exemplified, perhaps less obviously, in the work associated with Halliday, which comes under the headings of 'register analysis' and 'grammatical cohesion'. I will deal with each of these briefly in turn and indicate what relevance I think they have for the teaching of language. Although register analysis is not concerned with the way sentences are connected together in sequence, it falls within text analysis in that its purpose is to define varieties of language solely in terms of the occurrence of formal linguistic elements:

It is by their formal properties that registers are defined. If two samples of language activity from what, on non-linguistic grounds, could be considered different situation-types show no differences in grammar or lexis, they are assigned to one and the same register . . .

Halliday, McIntosh, and Stevens 1964: 89.

What has to be noted here is the deliberate rejection of the relevance of the 'sociological, non-linguistic categories' which, as we have seen, Labov represents as having a direct bearing on rules of discourse. Registers are, then, types of text, not types of discourse, since they are not defined in terms of what kind of communication they represent. The results of a register analysis of, say, a selection of scientific texts, will be a quantitative account of the frequency of occurrence of whichever formal elements were selected to be counted in the first place (see, for example, Huddleston *et al* 1968). That is to say, it will indicate how the texts concerned exemplify the language code: it will tell us nothing directly (though we may hazard a few guesses) about the communicative acts which are performed in the use of such formal elements. Register analysis has been taken up, and in some extent taken further, by Crystal and Davy (1969) under the name of 'general stylistics', but in spite of the refinements which they introduce into the analysis, it remains the analysis of text, as the following quotation makes clear:

. . . the procedures for approaching stylistic analysis are no different from those made use of in any descriptive exercise: the primary task is to catalogue and classify features within the framework of some general linguistic theory.

Crystal and Davy 1969: 60.

Register analysis, or general stylistic analysis (in the sense of Crystal and Davy), is open to a number of rather serious theoretical objections, of

which perhaps the principal one has to do with the difficulty of establishing when a formal difference is significant or not, when a certain linguistic feature is or is not stylistically distinctive. No two pieces of language are alike: but how non-alike do they have to be before they become stylistically distinct and specimens of different registers? We are not at present concerned with theoretical issues but with deciding on what value such an approach to text analysis might have for language teaching. As I mentioned earlier, this approach does not seek to establish the way in which sentences are connected. On the contrary, the analysis is an atomistic one which breaks a piece of language down into its constituent linguistic elements. This procedure yields information about the relative frequency of different linguistic forms in the texts that have been examined. The question is: how can this information be used in language teaching? It provides some guide as to which linguistic elements to include in a course designed for students who are to deal with the kind of texts which provided the material for analysis, but it gives no indication at all as to how such elements are to be presented as text. What usually happens is that the findings of such an analysis are used to produce remedial courses in which the most frequent linguistic elements are presented within the framework of sentences. I think that the essential shortcoming of register/general stylistic analysis, as preached and practised by Halliday *et al* and Crystal and Davy, is that it does not provide teachers with any directions as to how they might move from the sentence to the text. And yet the very reason for adopting the findings of such analysis is generally speaking to direct language teaching towards meeting the special needs of students, and to prepare them for their encounter with language in use as a medium for their specialist subjects. Register analysis may have its uses, but it seems to have very little value for the teaching of text, and none at all, of course, for the teaching of discourse.

The study of grammatical cohesion, on the other hand, does have direct relevance to the teaching of text, since it aims to discover 'the characteristics of a text as distinct from a collection of sentences' (Hasan 1968: 24, now incorporated into Halliday and Hasan 1976). This aim is not very different from that of Harris, whose analysis begins with an observation which might easily have served as a rubric for Hasan's work:

Language does not occur in stray words or sentences, but in connected discourse . . . Arbitrary conglomerations of sentences are indeed of no interest except as a check on grammatical description.

Harris 1952: 357.

But although the aims of both are alike, their approaches towards achieving them are quite different. Whereas Harris sets out to establish patterns of formal equivalence, Hasan is concerned with the cohesive function of certain linguistic forms. Harris deals with formal elements like equivalence classes, whereas Hasan deals with such functional notions

as anaphora and cataphora. The relevance of her work for language teaching lies in the fact that it indicates how language items take on particular values in context. For example, the lexical item *iron* stands in a relation of hyponymy to the lexical item *metal* in the semantic structure of English, but within a text they may have the value of synonymous expressions:

In engineering it is rare to find *iron* used in its pure form. Generally the *metal* is alloyed with carbon and other elements to form wrought iron, steels, and cast irons.

This is a simple instance of what Hasan refers to as 'substitution'. It is not always so easy to discover the referential value of items in a text. In the following, for example, the term *process* does not form a synonymous link with any preceding noun, and the term *ingredient* forms a link with a noun (i.e. *metal*) with which it has no semantic association in the code of the language at all:

Most alloys are prepared by mixing *metals* in the molten state; then the mixture is poured into moulds and allowed to solidify. In this *process*, the major *ingredient* is usually melted first.

Similarly, items like the demonstrative pronoun *this* cause considerable difficulty in texts because of the very wide range of values they can have. As Hasan points out, *this*

may have as referent not merely a nominal but any identifiable matter in the preceding text. Such matter may extend over a sentence, an entire paragraph, or even longer passages.

Hasan 1968: 58.

The importance of the work on grammatical cohesion is that it is a description of the devices which are used to link sentences together to form text and as such provides the language teacher with an inventory of points he must incorporate into exercises to develop a knowledge of this aspect of language use.

Hasan makes a distinction between 'The internal and the external aspects of "textuality"', the first having to do with cohesion, the second with the way language links meaningfully with the situation in which it is used. She speaks briefly about the external aspect of textuality in terms of register and her point seems to be that a piece of language can be recognized as text if its linguistic features can be plotted along a number of situational dimensions in such a way as to assign it to a specific register, even if cohesive links are missing. Similarly, Halliday defines the 'textual function' of language as having to do with 'making links with itself and with features of that situation in which it is used' (Halliday 1970a: 143), pointing out that cohesion is one aspect of the textual function as a whole (presumably that which relates to language 'making links with itself').

94 Explorations in Applied Linguistics

This function, says Halliday, 'enables the speaker or writer to construct "texts", or connected passages of discourse that is situationally relevant' (Halliday 1970a: 143). Here, text and discourse are not kept terminologically distinct but in my terms the external or situational aspects of 'text' or 'textuality' or 'texture', (Halliday 1970) have to do with discourse and are not concerned with *grammatical cohesion* between sentences, but with *rhetorical coherence* of utterances in the performance of acts of communication.

The distinction between *cohesion* and *coherence* brings us to a consideration of discourse. Advances in our understanding of discourse have not come from linguistics as it is generally understood but from the two areas of inquiry which we might call the sociology of language on the one hand and the philosophy of language on the other. I do not propose to attempt a review of this work, but only to indicate briefly where I think these two approaches converge, and what relevance they have for the teaching of language.

We may take the distinction between cohesion and coherence as our starting point. Labov as we have already noted has pointed out that there are certain rules of discourse which cannot be described without reference to social context. That is to say, the description of such rules depends on reference to what Hasan calls 'external aspects of textuality', or what Halliday calls 'features of the situation'. Let us consider two pieces of dialogue:

A Can you go to Edinburgh tomorrow?

B Yes I can.

A Can you go to Edinburgh tomorrow?

B B.E.A. pilots are on strike.

In the first of these exchanges, we have a cohesive text in that B uses an elliptical form of the sentence 'Yes, I can go to Edinburgh tomorrow' (ellipsis being one of Hasan's categories of cohesion). In the second exchange, there is no cohesion between the sentences which are used. And yet the two utterances in combination make sense: we understand that B is saying that he cannot go to Edinburgh because the strike rules out what he considers to be the only reasonable means of getting there. It seems justifiable to claim, then, that the second exchange is coherent as discourse without being cohesive as text. The question is: can we support this claim by postulating rules of discourse which will account for the rhetorical connections between the two utterances in the second exchange?

Labov takes the view that discourse rules have to do with the sequence of actions which are performed in the issuing of utterances. As he puts it:

Sequencing rules do not operate between utterances but between the actions performed by these utterances. In fact, there are usually no connections between successive utterances at all.

Labov 1970: 208.

Labov is of course thinking primarily of spoken communication here. Written communication of its nature requires a much higher degree of interdependency between cohesion and coherence. But it remains true for both media that discourse is characterized in terms of communicative actions and not in terms of linguistic forms. How, then, might we characterize the communicative actions performed in the second exchange? What Labov does is to specify a number of preconditions which have to be met for a given utterance to count as a particular communicative act. For an utterance to be seriously intended as an order, or a request for action, for example, the speaker, A, must believe the following:

- 1 That X, the action he refers to (e.g. going to Edinburgh), should be carried out for some purpose.
- 2 That the hearer, B, has the ability to do X.
- 3 That B has the obligation to do X.
- 4 That A has the right to ask B to do X.

The coherence of our second exchange is accounted for by the fact that each utterance focuses on the second of these preconditions. For A's utterance to be interpreted by B as an order, the other preconditions must be understood as obtaining by virtue of the situation, including, of course, the relationship between the two people. In these circumstances it is only necessary for the speaker to draw the hearer's attention to one precondition for the act of ordering to be performed, and only necessary for the hearer to refer to the same condition to decline to act upon the order.

The key to this approach to the analysis of discourse lies, then, in the understanding of what conditions must obtain for an utterance to count as a particular communicative act. An investigation into these conditions has been a feature of recent work in the philosophy of language. Searle (1969), following the lead of Austin (1962), has specified the conditions attendant upon the acts of promising, advising, warning, greeting, congratulating, and so on. We might expect that as this kind of work proceeds, and as we learn more about the relationship between what is said and what is done, we shall be able to describe a type of discourse in terms of the kinds of communicative acts it represents, and the manner in which they are given linguistic expression. Thus we might hope that we shall be in a position to characterize varieties of language not as registers or types of text, but as different ways of communicating. To take an example, scientific varieties of English are, as I have noted earlier, generally represented as types of text, exemplifying a high incidence of forms like the passive, certain modals, certain types of adverbial clause, and so on. There seems no reason why they should not, in course of time, be represented as types of discourse consisting of certain combinations of such acts as definition, classification, generalization, qualification, and so on, combinations which in many cases constitute larger communicative units

like explanations, descriptions, and reports, and which may be said to reflect the actual methodology of scientific inquiry. It should be noted that although it is convenient to consider acts of communication initially as corresponding with sentence-like stretches of language, there is no reason why such a correspondence should be assumed. In the case of acts like describing and reporting, for example, the conditions attendant on their performance in any particular type of discourse are likely to be communicative acts in their own right.

What I have tried to do in this paper is to distinguish two ways of looking at language beyond the limit of the sentence. One way sees it as text, a collection of formal objects held together by patterns of equivalences or frequencies or by cohesive devices. The other way sees language as discourse, a use of sentences to perform acts of communication which cohere into larger communicative units, ultimately establishing a rhetorical pattern which characterizes the piece of language as a whole as a kind of communication. Both approaches to the description of language have their purposes, and if I have sometimes appeared to be recommending the latter at the expense of the former, this is only to restore the balance for language teaching, which should, in my view, be as much concerned with discourse as with text. What is important is that we should recognize the limitations of a particular approach to analysis, and not be too easily persuaded that it provides us with the only valid characterization of language in use. My reason for pointing to the limitations of register analysis and general stylistics (in the sense of Crystal and Davy) was that this approach has too often been represented as the only one to adopt when delimiting the language of a particular area of use. To be fair, and to maintain the balance, one might point to a similar atomistic approach to the description of discourse: the traditional rhetorical one which searches passages of prose for metaphor, litotes, oxymoron, synecdoche, and so on, or to more recent studies in rhetoric which focus on the 'topic sentence' and describe the development of discourse only in terms of its referential function.

I have said that text analysis and discourse analysis are different but complementary ways of looking at language in use. I am aware that recent work in linguistics has attempted to integrate features of discourse into a unitary model of grammar by writing presuppositions, illocutionary act indicators, and so on into the base component of a generative grammar (see, for example, Ross 1970, Lakoff 1970). The result seems to have blurred the distinction between sentence and utterance and between semantics and pragmatics, and to create, in consequence, a good deal of confusion in linguistic description. One might point, for example, to the long discussion on the verb 'Remind' in recent editions of *Linguistic Inquiry*, initiated by Postal (1970), and to the corrective statements by Bar-Hillel (1971) and Bolinger (1971). It is interesting, in

this connection to see linguists tending towards the same error as beset linguistic philosophers of an earlier era (see Strawson 1950). Both Postal (1970) and Karttunen (1970, 1971), for example, in their attempts to bring discourse features into grammar seem to me to be confusing what Strawson shows so clearly must be kept distinct: a sentence, and a use of a sentence (Strawson 1950: 6), or, in my terms, text and discourse. Discourse must, of course, ultimately be accounted for in a total linguistic description, as both Hymes and Labov insist, but this does not necessarily involve incorporating it into a prescribed generative model of grammar.

There is, then, a good deal of turmoil in linguistics as a result of its attempts to account for the communicative properties of language. Meanwhile, the language teacher cannot wait for the dust to settle. I believe that it is urgent that he should incorporate text and discourse into his teaching. While linguists are arguing among themselves, there is a great deal that can be done. We can set about devising exercises to develop a knowledge of grammatical cohesion. We can consider how far we can select and grade teaching material in terms of communicative acts rather than simply in terms of linguistic structures. We can, in short, be working out ways in which we can teach our students to use the foreign language to define, classify, generalize, promise, predict, describe, report, and so on; to make them aware of how the language is used for the particular kind of communication they are concerned with. Some ways of how this might be done are suggested in Allen and Widdowson (1974a and b). In time we might hope that linguists will provide us with more specific directions to follow. Meanwhile, the applied linguist, working, as it were, from the pedagogic end, can begin to specify the nature of different communicative acts, the way they are realized, the way they combine in different varieties of language use. These specifications may well develop from attempts to design language teaching materials which focus on the teaching of discourse. The applied linguist does not always have to wait, indeed, he cannot always wait, for the linguist to provide him with something to apply. He may follow his own path towards pedagogic application once the theorist has given a hint of the general direction. He may even, on the way, discover a direction or two which the theoretical linguist might himself explore with profit.

Notes

Paper presented at the first Neuchâtel Colloquium in Applied Linguistics, May 1972, and published in the proceedings: Corder and Roulet 1973.