RELEVANCE VERSUS CONNECTION: DISCOURSE AND TEXT AS UNITS OF ANALYSIS

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Abstract

The interpretation of speech can be dealt with in terms of grammar, if grammatical categories are extended beyond the sentence. After briefly reviewing speech acts, discourse acts and relevance, two units are thus posited, the discourse and the text, and they are defined in strictly linguistic-theoretical terms, by means of a principle of connection. Following this principle, sentences are linked using additional information, which is not explicitly represented in the sentence. The resulting units are structured sequences of sentences, called discourses, which are, in turn, linked in a structured way into larger units, called texts.

Key words

Speech acts, relevance, discourse, text

1. Speech acts

As everybody knows, pragmatics is the standard solution to the limits of sentence grammar[1]. In a way, the difference between grammar and pragmatics is an updated version of the distinction between

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system and use, or between *langue* and *parole*. A major contribution in the field of pragmatics is the concept of the speech act. Speaking is not only saying things about reality, it is also doing things about it, and there is even nothing but action in some cases. There are two main arguments in favor of speech acts. One is the existence of performative expressions, such as 'I promise to come'. The second argument is the existence of questions and orders or requests, which are not used to say something about reality, but rather as tools to do something. The first point results in the classification of speech acts in terms of the corresponding performative expressions, for instance, commissive speech acts in terms of the performative 'I promise'. The second one leads to the distinction between sentences (declarative, interrogative, and imperative) and utterances (statements, questions, and requests), and poses the problem of the so-called indirect speech act, where a request, for instance, may be made by means of a declarative sentence, instead of an imperative one (which would be an example of a direct speech act).

Actually, performative expressions are the result of a lexical property: there are verbs that describe acts which are socially defined as being performed by means of speech. For instance, promising is a social act, whereas the linguistic phenomenon is the fact that a given expression ('I promise you to go') may be understood as an act of promising. Performative expressions are not different from others (such as 'I will go') in that they are understood as actions, but rather, in the fact that they may refer to very action which is performed by using them (performative expressions are self-referring; see Garrido 1997: 204). We are then left with the other kind of speech acts: the expressions that are understood as statements, requests, or questions, whether they are declarative or imperative or interrogative (that is, both direct and indirect speech acts).

2. Discourse acts

Roulet (1995: 321) locates speech acts in a wider, hierarchical structure, where dialogues are analyzed into one or more 'exchanges', and where exchanges consists of 'moves', which are in turn linked to each other by "the initiative and/ or reactive illocutionary functions which are generally attributed to speech acts", such as a question move followed by an information/ response move. Each move "consists of a main 'discourse act', possibly accompanied by exchanges, moves, or acts that are subordinated to it; those constituents are linked by so-called interactive relations (preparation, justification, reformulation)" (Roulet 1995: 321). These units may be extended to written communication (see Kroon 1997). In the first version of this model (Roulet et al. 1985, chapter 1), there are two other higher units, interactions and transactions. Interactions are made up of transactions, and transactions consist of moves.

The problem is, as Roulet (1995: 321) points out, that a discourse act "does not necessarily coincide with a syntactic sentence". There is no general procedure that assigns a discourse structure to a given stretch of talk. Moeschler (1996: 184) does posit "linking constraints" ("contraintes d'enchaînement"), which determine the degree of cohesion and coherence of a given sequence; but one has to know that a given constituent is an act, for instance, in order to apply rules such as the one proposed by Moeschler (1996: 189): "For every sequence of acts <A1, A2> in a move M, project a category mA [main act] and a category sA [subordinated act]". Besides, it is not clear how to decide which one of the two is to be the main act.

Problems in establishing the hierarchy of units in a given sequence lead Moeschler (1996: 194) to substitute an approach based on relations between propositional forms for this approach based on discourse constituents. Instead of coherence as a result of discourse relations, Moeschler (1996: 214)

applies Sperber and Wilson's (1986) relevance approach to relations between propositional forms (propositions), as expressed by means of utterances and of contextual information. Relevance applies to utterances as well as to discourses. A discourse is a "non-arbitrary sequence of utterances" ("suite non arbitraire d'énoncés") (Reboul and Moeschler 1996: 90). An utterance is the result of a specific use of a sentence ("phrase"), whereas a sentence is a "complete grammatical sequence" (Reboul and Moeschler 1996: 64). We are thus back to the standard approach, where language and speech are apart, belonging to different components, grammar and pragmatics. The only difference is that speech is allowed to have larger units than the utterance, but the interpretation process, based on relevance, is the same for both utterances and discourses. Before dealing with this double standard (of grammatical units and pragmatic or discourse units), let us briefly examine the explanation based on relevance.

3. Relevance

Sperber and Wilson (1986) offer a general theory of human cognition and communication. When speaking, they argue, people ellicit conclusions which are valid only for the specific case where they arise. In order to arrive at those conclusions, people use data which are valid only for these specific occasions. Both direct and indirect speech acts are explained in this way. For instance, 'It is rather late' as an answer to 'Do you want a drink?' is to be understood in terms of the contextual information that when it is late one does not want a drink. The conclusion is that 'It is rather late' is to be interpreted as a negative answer, in this particular situation.

There is a general principle, the principle of relevance, that explains not only indirect but also direct cases. According to Sperber and Wilson, there is always the need to look for additional information that will allow for conclusions otherwise absent. This property of rendering additional conclusions which compensate for the effort in bringing them about is called relevance by Sperber and Wilson. They argue that relevance is guaranteed: every utterance carries the presumption of being relevant. In order to be relevant, an indirect speech act, that is, the corresponding utterance, must be interpreted in these terms: something extra must be taken into account, so that, for example, a request might be understood out of a declarative or an interrogative sentence ('I have no money left' or 'Do you have any money?'). The problem of the second type of speech acts (statements, questions, and requests, and their problematic indirect relation to sentence types, declarative, interrogative, and imperative) is thus solved. There is always an interpretation process, a more elaborate one in indirect cases. There remains the problem of how this general interpretation takes place.

4. Two ways to the solution

The key to the process is taking into account the right additional information. Both speaker and hearer must follow the same path in order to arrive at the same interpretation. Wilson and Sperber (1993) (and Blakemore 1995) argue that the non-propositional components of the utterance's linguistic form place constraints on the process of interpretation, that is, they represent procedural information (versus the propositional information encoded by the other components in the utterance's linguistic form). But rather than being a constraint on the interpretation, each aspect of the linguistic expression contributing to its connection forces a given interpretation, because connections are inevitable (see Garrido 1997: 242): linguistic units are built up so that they are necessarily linked with additional information. It is not that additional information may be provided, but rather that units don't work, that they are not understood, unless some specific information is added. There is only a way to understand them, that is, a way to connect them (when there is more than one, either ambiguity or misunderstanding arise).

This amounts to disregarding the difference between sentence and utterance. Sentences are made so that they fit in specific sequences or discourses, that is, they require certain additional information which is either available in the preceding sentences or it must be added to them. The way to connect a sentence within the discourse where it belongs is marked by grammatical means (see Garrido 1998a): in other words, the structure of the sequence of sentences belongs to the grammar. This solution thus requires both a grammatical unit larger than the sentence and a principle of interpretation different from the principle of relevance. In fact, both are different sides of the same coin.

5. Discourse and text as units

Sentences are linked in sequences which may be called 'discourses'. These units have a semantic representation, a "discourse representation structure", in terms of Kamp and Reyle (1993: 59), which is incremental: "in order to make sense of a discourse-internal sentence the interpreter must connect it with the interpretation he has assigned to the sentences preceding it" (Kamp 1995: 254). In turn, discourses are organized into larger structures, up to texts. And texts are not defined in terms of coherence (as proposed by Beaugrande and Dressler 1981) or relevance (Blass 1990; see also Wilson 1998), but by the connection existing between their component discourses. Similarly, a discourse is not defined in terms of contextual information, but it is the result of connecting its component sentences. In order for this connection to take place, additional information must be included. This happens whenever a unit is connected to others. Connection is the general process that accounts for syntactic structure itself. In every complex unit there is information that is not represented by the component units, but rather added to them so that the result is the complex unit itself. Frequently this additional information is added as default, but it may also originate in preceding units. Thus words are linked to each other into phrases, phrases into clauses, clauses into sentences, sentences into discourses, and discourses into texts. Text types, or genres, account for the way discourses are connected; styles, or discourse types, organize in general ways the connection between sentences within discourses.

When we examine an example, we reverse the real situation. We interpret every sentence, adding contextual information to it. In real life situations, every sentence makes salient the piece of available information that is required in order to link the sentence interpretation (that is, to link the sentence itself) to the discourse and the text it belongs to. In the following example, the first speaker A says its first sentence, A1, whereas the second speaker, B, says two sentences, B1 and B2 (notice that a sentence may or may not include a clause structure):

A1: ¿you want a drink?

B1: no

B2: it's late

The only way to make sense out of the three sentences is to link them in two steps: B1 and B2 are the answer to A1. There are two discourses, to be interpreted as an invitation and as a refusal to the invitation, respectively: D1 (consisting of A1) and D2 (consisting of B1 and B2).

A different possibility would be the following:

A1: ¿you want a drink?

B1: no

A2: it's late

Here, the first speaker accepts the refusal by giving a possible explanation for the refusal. There are three one-sentence discourses, and the three of them may be followed by another piece of conversation (and they be preceded by another one, for that matter). If it were so, there would be the preceding discourse D1, the actual discourse D2 (consisting of three one-sentence discourses just mentioned, D3 (A1), D4 (B1) and D5 (A2)), and the following discourse, D6 (where discourses are given arbitrary numbers, D1, D2, and so on).

A third possible discourse structure would be:

A1: ¿you want a drink?

B1: no

B2: let's go

Here, the second sentence that B says is to be linked to the total preceding it. Thus, A1 and B1 make up D1 (a complex discourse consisting of the one-sentence discourse D2, the invitation, and the one-sentence discourse D3, the refusal). B2 is the continuation to D1, that is, it makes up another discourse, D4.

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       ┌─ D2: A1: ¿you want a drink?
  ┌ D1:┤
  │    └─ D3: B1: no
  │
  │
  └ D4: B2: let's go
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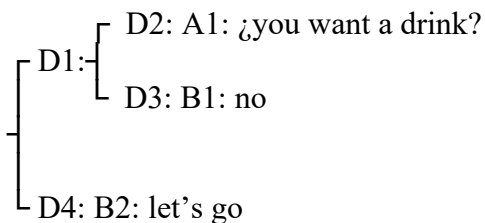
D1 and D4 make up another discourse, a larger one, which may be linked to other parts of the conversation (which itself is the text unit). Or the whole conversation may consist of D1 and D4, that is, the whole text might be this short sequence.

The point is that, for every example, there is only one way to link the sentences. If there were other ways, there would be either ambiguity or misunderstanding, or both.

6. Connection

Instead of two components, a grammatical one and a pragmatic one, there is just one, up to texts. Instead of syntax and relevance, there is only connection. Connection may be very generally described by the following principle of connection: every unit is connected to the others by means of additional information, which is not explicitly represented. Instead of every utterance being relevant, every sentence, in fact every unit, from the word up to the text, is guaranteed to be understandable, that is, except for possible ambiguities or misunderstandings, the interpretation of every unit has to be integrated in a wider cognitive unit, according to the unit's position in the corresponding wider syntactic structure. The sentence's inner structure establishes its outward links, that is, every sentence is designed so that its inner structure fits the outer, discourse structure where the sentence is located (see Garrido 1998b).

This approach differs from relevance theory in two ways: first, instead of utterances as uses of sentences, discourses are made up of sentences (and in turn make up texts); secondly, instead of warranting relevance for the utterance, each sentence is part of a discourse, and its semantic representation is a part of the discourse representation structure. As a result, instead of adding contextual assumptions to the utterance, each sentence is built so that it is integrated into the discourse by means of additional information. This process of adding information is governed by the discourse structure, that is, by both the internal structure of the component sentences and the discourse structure itself. The explanation based on connection is not based only on the hearer's interpretation, but it accounts for the way the speaker designs an interpretation for each sentence in the discourse, and, when the speaker succeeds, for the way the hearer is forced to construct an interpretation following the path designed by the speaker.

Let us review the kind of information that is always arrived at in every category. Adding whatever information may be demanded in the process, the connection of two sentences requires that a speaker (and possibly, an addressee) of these sentences be established (for instance, the same speaker for both sentences or a different one for each sentence). Similarly, linking two discourses requires the specification of its component relation, such as the rhetorical relations specified by Lascarides, Copestake and Briscoe (1996: 48). For instance, a discourse may make up a question, and the following discourse may serve as an answer to that question. Notice that discourses may consist of just one sentence. Discourses are recursively integrated into larger discourses, and those into text structures.

Text structures are patterned after text types, which are usually said to have a social function, "a shared public purpose" (Swales 1987: 13). Actually, text structure reveals in linguistic terms what is generally considered to be extralinguistic, that is, this "public function" (for an example of press news, see Garrido 1998c). Mann, Matthiesen and Thompson (1992: 41) posit three different levels of structure: "holistic" or text structure, "relational" structure (where rhetorical relations obtain) and "syntactic" structure, or sentence structure. Instead of this three-layer structure, there is only a hierarchical one, from text to discourse, from discourse to sentence, or, rather, from sentence structure to discourse structure, and from discourse structure to text structure. As we have seen, each sentence is interpreted by being integrated into a discourse representation structure, in the same same way each discourse is intepreted as it is connected into the text representation structure. Actually, sentences and discourses are designed so that they are interpretable in this way. Similarly, each text is designed so that it is integrated into a cognitive representation of an action, since texts are part of wider structures, social actions. A contract, for instance, is a part of a larger social institution, of buying and selling property and services. When a

text is so connected into the wider social unit, additional information plays a role, too. We understand a text when we are able to put its intepretation into a wider cognitive representation, that of the action of which the text is a part. There is nothing extralinguistic in texts, but rather, texts, as linguistic objects, are linguistic parts of non-linguistic objects, human actions.

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