1 Background: What is discourse?

1.1 Discourse analysis

Discourse analysis is a vast and ambiguous field. Consider two recent definitions. First, Brown and Yule (1983: 1) state that:

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 these forms are designed to serve in human affairs.

Second, Stubbs (1983a: 1) states that discourse analysis consists of:

attempts to study the organization of language above the sentence or above the clause, and therefore to study larger linguistic units, such as conversational exchanges or written texts. It follows that discourse analysis is also concerned with language in use in social contexts, and in particular with interaction or dialogue between speakers.

Brown and Yule emphasize a particular perspective toward language (functional versus structural) which is tied to a focus on parole (versus langue); Stubbs’ emphasis on a particular unit of analysis (‘above the sentence’) leads him toward a similar pragmatic emphasis on ‘language in use’. The authors then observe a definitional problem similar to the one noted above. Brown and Yule (1983: viii) observe that the term discourse analysis has come to be used with a wide range of meanings which cover a wide range of activities. It is used to describe activities at the intersection of disciplines as diverse as sociolinguistics, psycho-linguistics, philosophical linguistics and computational linguistics.

Stubbs (1983a: 12) continues:

no one is in a position to write a comprehensive account of discourse analysis. The subject is at once too vast, and too lacking in focus and consensus... Anything at all that is written on discourse analysis is partial and controversial.

The vastness and ambiguity of discourse analysis is also suggested by...
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textbooks on different approaches to language, such as pragmatics, which define this field as 'the study of the general conditions of the communicative use of language' (Leech 1983: 10) and which include chapters on conversation analysis (Levinson 1983: Chapter 6), and by edited collections in sociolinguistics (e.g. Baugh and Sherzer 1984, Giglioli 1972) which include articles that could fit as comfortably into readers on discourse analysis.

It should not really be surprising that discourse analysis is so vast and diffuse: like pragmatics and sociolinguistics, it has its intellectual roots not only in linguistics, but in the social sciences and in philosophy. Discourse analysis began within linguistics through the work of Harris (1951, 1952), a structural linguist who used distributional methods of analysis to discover recurrent patterns of morphemes which would differentiate a text from a random collection of sentences. Within the social sciences, anthropology has promoted interest in naturally occurring discourse as a culturally relative realization of ways of acting and being (Hymes 1974). In addition, the distinction between referential and social functions of language which is so important to discourse studies had its roots in anthropologist Malinowski’s (1930) concept of phatic communion. Sociology also shares responsibility for promoting interest in discourse. From Durkheim’s (1895) notion of social fact (a constraint external to the individual) which was adapted by de Saussure in his characterization of *langue*, to Simmel’s (1911) focus on forms of social life including conversation and small group interactions, discourse has long been one of the natural interfaces between sociology and linguistics. More recent work by Goffman (e.g. 1959, 1971, 1974, 1981a, 1981b) focused attention on microanalytic frames of social interaction, including the use of language as a sign-vehicle in discourse. The phenomenological movement within philosophy (Schutz 1970) was an impetus for a school of sociology (ethnomethodology) in which the focus of attention is on the common sense procedures used by individuals to construct social worlds: discourse not only provides one of the procedures, but it is part of the social world under construction. And also within philosophy, work by Austin (1962) and Searle (1969) on speech acts, and by Grice on conversational maxims (1975) forced attention to language use.

Because discourse analysis is so vast a field, readers of discourse analyses may find themselves unexpectedly confronted by terms, concepts, and perspectives borrowed from a home turf which is different from their own. (Of course, an equally disorienting problem faces discourse analysts: they may need to wander into analytic terrain which is far from their own initial start-
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I therefore want to begin this book on discourse markers – words like oh, well, and, but, or, so, because, now, then, I mean, and y’know – by discussing some assumptions that I will be making about discourse (1.2) and some properties of discourse (1.3). Although I am sure that some readers will find even these assumptions and this discussion of basic properties to be disputable, I then go on to still more controversial ground: I discuss how discourse properties are to be integrated (1.4) within a model of coherence in discourse (1.5).

Note, then, that although this first chapter will say nothing about discourse markers per se, it is important background not only for the orientation reason mentioned above, but because it provides a theoretical background for the study of discourse markers, and a model upon which I will base both my analysis of specific markers (Chapters 4–9) and my general conclusions (Chapter 10).

1.2 Assumptions of discourse analysis

The key assumptions about language which I take to be central to current discourse analysis concern context and communication.

1. Language always occurs in a context.  
2. Language is context sensitive.  
3. Language is always communicative.  
4. Language is designed for communication.

1.2.1 Language always occurs in a context

A great deal of sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic research has detailed the specific contexts in which language is produced and interpreted – contexts which range from cultural contexts of shared meanings and world views, to social contexts through which definitions of self and situation are constructed, to cognitive contexts of past experience and knowledge. Understanding how language is used and how it is structured depends on consideration of how it is embedded in all of these contexts. In fact, the role of context is so pervasive that it figures even in grammatical analyses whose data consist of individual intuitions about idealized isolated sentences. Not only is the introspection which accompanies intuition actually a special kind of cognitive context in and of itself, but (as teachers of introductory syntax can no doubt attest) individuals are very adept at imagining discourse contexts in which ungrammatical sentences find a natural home.
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And as Goffman (1981a: 30) states, the grammarian's effort to analyze single, isolated sentences requires a general understanding 'that this effort is an acceptable, even worthy, thing to do'. Goffman (1981a: 30–1) goes on to say that:

The mental set required to make sense out of these little orphans is that of someone with linguistic interests, someone who is posing a linguistic issue and is using a sample sentence to further his argument. In this special context of linguistic elaboration, an explication and discussion of the sample sentence will have meaning, and this special context is to be found anywhere in the world where there are grammarians... So all along, the sentences used by linguists take at least some of their meaning from the institutionalization of this kind of illustrative process.

As Goffman's point suggests, it is not only intuitions about the grammaticality of sentences which are inherently contextualized: so too, are intuitions about semantic meaning. Gazdar (1979: 3–4) suggests that Katz's (Katz 1977, Katz and Fodor 1963) effort to invent a sentence which is totally decontextualized (and would thus be free for semantic interpretation based solely on referential meaning) is futile precisely because inferences about contextually provided non-referential meanings can never be totally excluded. In fact, one of the problems for current research in pragmatics is to successfully limit which of the many features of context actually do enter into utterance interpretation.2

Thus, I assume that language always occurs in some kind of context, including cognitive contexts in which past experience and knowledge is stored and drawn upon, cultural contexts consisting of shared meanings and world views, and social contexts through which both self and others draw upon institutional and interactional orders to construct definitions of situation and action.3

1.2.2 Language is context sensitive

Not only does language always occur in a context, but its patterns – of form and function, and at surface and underlying levels – are sensitive to features of that context. Analyses from a variety of perspectives have documented systematic relationships between language and context which penetrate to all levels of language; see, for example, the quantitative sociolinguistic analyses which focus on how constraints drawn from cultural, social, psychological, and textual domains affect phonological, morphological, and syntactic variation (Fasold 1983, Fasold and Shuy 1975, Labov and Sankoff 1980, Sankoff and Cedergren 1981). Examples of the context sen-
sitivity of language could be almost endlessly multiplied from studies of the internal and external pressures on language change, to studies of how cultural presuppositions influence narrative structure, to studies of how different degrees of mutual knowledge influence language use and expression.

In sum, I assume that language is potentially sensitive to all of the contexts in which it occurs, and, even more strongly, that language reflects those contexts because it helps to constitute them.

1.2.3 Language is always communicative

Because language is always addressed to a recipient (either actual or intended) it is always communicative. Note that I am considering communication in a very broad sense here. Some analysts have argued that communication occurs only under certain conditions of speaker intentionality. Ekman and Freisen (1969), for example, differentiate messages which are informative from those which are communicative: the former elicit similar interpretations in observers but may be inaccurate information about the sender; the latter need not be informative (i.e. may not receive consistent interpretations) but are those which a sender consciously intends to send. Still other messages are interactive: they modify another’s behavior, even though they need be neither consistently interpreted nor consciously intended toward a particular modification. MacKay (1972) offers another differentiation: communication is necessarily goal-directed and interpreted as goal-directed; whatever is either not goal-directed, or not interpreted as such, falls into the category of conduct. Similar to MacKay is Grice’s (1957) well known concept of meaning-nn (an abbreviation for non-natural meaning): speaker’s intended meaning which receives an interpretation and a response because a recipient recognizes the intention (rather than the meaning per se). A much broader view of communication is that of Ruesch and Bateson (1951) and Watzlawick, Beavin and Jackson (1967) who suggest that whatever occurs within the presence of a sender and a receiver is communicative: so long as it becomes available to another within a shared domain, it need not have been intended as message to count as communication. Goffman (1959) makes the distinction between information given and information given-off: the first is communication in the narrow (intended and received) sense; the second is information which is interpreted for meaning, and assigned significance, simply because it occurs in the presence of another and because it resides within a shared sign system – regardless of its intentional transmission.

I assume that communication occurs when a sender either gives, or gives
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off, information. Thus, I assume that language is always communicative either because it is directed toward a recipient (immediate or eventual), because it is intended to be so directed, and/or because it is attended by a recipient.

1.2.4 Language is designed for communication

My final assumption is that language is designed to reflect its communicative basis. Consider, for example, the design features of language discussed by Hockett (1958): some certainly contribute to the ease with which language can be used as a system of communication (e.g. the fact that language is a code with unrestricted displacement in time and space). (See also discussion in Lyons 1972, 1977a: 70–85.) Or consider those features of language which respond to the need for ease of comprehension: Slobin (1975) suggests, for example, that the tremendous amount of redundancy in language is designed to ease the comprehension process. Such features may be interpreted as designed to aid the recipient’s end of the communication process (also Leech 1983: 64–70). Many features of language use are also recipient designed (Sacks 1971): for example, choice among reference terms (e.g. DuBois 1980) and the organization of information in sentences (e.g. Prince 1981) takes recipients’ current information state into account, i.e. what information can be assumed to be shared. Furthermore, communicative processes guide the emergence and development of syntactic structures in language, both diachronically (Givón 1979, Sankoff and Brown 1976, Sankoff 1984) and ontogenetically (Bates and MacWhinney 1979, 1982, Ochs and Schieffelin 1979). And at another level of communication – the communication of social information and group membership – studies of sociolinguistic variation show how the communication of group identity leads to the maintenance or change of the sound system of language (e.g. Labov 1972d, Downes 1983).

In sum, I assume that language is designed for communication, or as Lyons (1977a: 638) states, that ‘there is much in the structure of languages that can only be explained on the assumption that they have developed for communication in face-to-face interaction’.

1.3 Properties of discourse

I now discuss several properties of discourse: discourse forms structures (1.3.1), conveys meanings (1.3.2), and accomplishes actions (1.3.3). It will become obvious that these properties concern slightly different aspects
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of discourse. The first two properties are largely concerned with discourse as extended sequences of smaller units, e.g. sentences, propositions, utterances. The third property is more concerned with language as it is used within a social interaction; included is speakers' use not only of extended sequences, but their use of a single unit (e.g. an utterance) within a social interaction. By examining relationships among these properties of discourse (1.4), I lead into a discussion of coherence (1.5) – which I view as an integrative property of discourse.

1.3.1 Structure

Studies of discourse structure have dealt with two related issues: is discourse structure a linguistic structure? Can discourse structure be studied with methods inherited from linguistics? One of the earliest analysts of discourse, Harris (1952), attempted to extend the methods of structural linguistics into discourse analysis: the structure of a text was produced by recurrent patterns of morphemes independent of either their meaning, or their relationship with non-textual factors. More recent approaches have based discourse grammars on transformational generative sentence grammars: van Dijk (1972), for example, claims that texts can be treated as extensions of sentences and that a text grammar can be written in the same form as a generative sentence grammar. Within such a text grammar, the acceptability of a discourse would be determined by a set of rules acting as formal criteria for the interpretability of sentences within the text. Several studies take a more liberal approach to non-textual factors in their suggestion that discourse structure reflects the informational content and structure of what is being talked about. Linde and Labov (1975) and Linde and Goguen (1978) show that the structure of specific discourse units (apartment descriptions, plans) is modelled after their informational structure and content. Grosz (1981) shows that the process of focusing on specific entities throughout a discourse is modelled after the structure of a specific task in which the referred-to entities are used.

Although the studies mentioned thus far differ in terms of their inclusion of non-textual factors, they all view discourse as a structured composition of linguistic constituents (morphemes, clauses, sentences) within a monologue. Other studies of discourse structure differ either because they focus on linguistic units within dialogue, or because they focus on non-linguistic units. Some analysts take the position that linguistic units are the basic constituents of dialogue structure. Polanyi and Scha (1983), for example, argue that discourse has a syntactic structure in which clauses belong to
discourse units ranging in size from local turn-taking exchanges, to more extended semantic units, such as narratives, and even to speech events and exchanges.

Many other studies of dialogue structure focus on units which are not strictly linguistic. Key to an ethnomethodological approach to discourse, for example, is the concept of adjacency pair: a sequentially constrained pair of turns at talk in which the occurrence of a first-pair-part creates a slot for the occurrence of a second-pair-part (a conditional relevance), such that the non-occurrence of that second-pair-part is heard as an official absence (Schegloff and Sacks 1973). Examples are question/answer pairs, compliment and response pairs. Evidence for the constraining influence of first-pair-parts comes from various observations about the consequences of absent second-pair-parts: first-pair-parts are repeated when their attendant expectations are violated, delayed second-pair-parts are accompanied with explanations for the delay (Schegloff 1972). Adjacency pairs exhibit structure not only because they strongly constrain linear sequence, but because they provide a basis for formal modifications of dialogue: insertion sequences (Schegloff 1972), for example, can be characterized as one adjacency pair embedded within another.

Other research takes us still further from a dependence on purely linguistic constituents of discourse structure to show how sequences of actions are formally constrained and modified. Goffman (1971) and Merritt (1976) demonstrate that sequences of particular conversational moves, e.g. requests, remedies, acknowledgements, can undergo formal modifications ranging from embedding to ellipsis to coupling, as can many ritual interactions, such as greetings (Irvine 1974, Schiffrin 1977). In these analyses, the formal modifications of action sequences are explicitly linked to variation in non-textual, situational factors.

In sum, whether monologue and dialogue structures are composed of linguistic constituents, and whether such structures can be studied with methods inherited from linguistics, are questions which are central to ultimate decisions as to whether discourse structure is purely linguistic, and whether that structure parallels other types of language structure (see Levinson 1981, Stubbs 1983a: Chapter 5).

1.3.2 Meaning

Our discussion of structure showed that some analysts apply methods used in sentence analysis to discourse, while either maintaining or rejecting the notion that it is linguistic units *per se* (morphemes, clauses, sentences)
which form the basic constituents of discourse. Other discourse analysts argue that texts are so different in kind from smaller linguistic units that methods used for analyzing such units should not be expected to provide a model for discourse analysis. Halliday and Hasan (1976) argue, for example, that although structure may be one definitional source of a text—a source that specific genres of texts share with sentences—a more compelling source is at the level of semantic relationships underlying the text. Thus, particular items such as pronouns, adverbs, and conjunctions help create discourse not because of their rule-governed distribution, but because they indicate an interpretive link between two parts within the text. And although we can recognize a cohesive element by its surface appearance in a clause, what such an element actually displays is a connection between the underlying propositional content of two clauses—the clause in which the element appears and a prior clause. In short, the cohesive link is established because interpretation of an element in one clause presupposes information from a prior clause.

Cohesion can be found not only in monologue, but in dialogue. A convenient way to locate conversational cohesion is to examine dialogic pairs whose propositional completion depends on contributions from both speaker and hearer. Question/answer pairs are an example. In asking a question, a speaker presents a proposition which is incomplete either as to polarity (a yes–no question) or as to who, what, where, why, when or how (a WH-question). Completion of the proposition is up to the recipient of the question, who either fixes the polarity or fills in the WH-information. Analyses of communicative development in children also suggest that shared responsibility for conversational cohesion extends to propositional completion in general (Ochs and Schieffelin 1979), discourse topic (Keenan and Schieffelin 1976) and reference (Atkinson 1979, Scollon 1979).

In sum, studies of cohesion indicate that the meaning conveyed by a text is meaning which is interpreted by speakers and hearers based on their inferences about the propositional connections underlying what is said. Cohesive devices do not themselves create meaning; they are clues used by speakers and hearers to find the meanings which underlie surface utterances.

Before closing this section, it is important to note that the underlying propositional connections cued by cohesive ties are not posited as the only source of textual meaning. Not only do Halliday and Hasan (1976: 23–6) make this point clear, but Halliday’s (1973) model of language explicitly views cohesion as only one component of a broader textual function of
language (a function which includes both thematic and informational components). Thus, propositional meaning does not exhaust the meaning of a text. Nor is cohesion supposed to supply all the inferences and understandings made available through a text. (Pragmatic perspectives, including analyses of speaker intention (Grice 1957), communicative strategies (Gumperz 1982, Leech 1983), and cooperative maxims (Grice 1975) help to provide a principled account of these additional inferences.) Thus, a complete analysis of the meaning of a text would specify both the propositional meanings displayed by cohesive ties, and the inferences and understandings derived through application of contextual and pragmatic principles.

1.3.3 Actions

Structure and meaning are properties of discourse when discourse is considered as a linear sequence of smaller units, e.g. sentences, turns, propositions. Although action – or more accurately the accomplishment of action – is also a property of discourse, it is a property which emerges not so much from arrangements of underlying units, as from the organization of speaker goals and intentions which are taken up and acted upon by hearers, and from the ways in which language is used in service of such goals.

Four branches of study contribute to our understanding of discourse as a means of action. The most general contribution is from theoretical discussions of the functions of language. Many linguists distinguish a referential (also referred to as descriptive, representational, or cognitive) function of language from a social function (e.g. Gumperz 1964). Others suggest a three-part division in which a referential function is differentiated from social and expressive functions (e.g. Bühler’s 1934 terms ‘conative’ and ‘emotive’). Jakobson (1960) differentiates six functions of language, arguing that each is based upon a different component of the overall speech situation, i.e. emotive (the addressee), phatic (the addressee/addresses relationship), meta-linguistic (the code), poetic (the message form), referential (the context). These functional classifications share two insights. First, language is a vehicle through which a range of different functions can be realized – functions which differ markedly from the referential function, i.e. the transmittal of information about the world to one who does not share that information. Second, the various functions of language influence its structure, i.e. the different parts and patterns of language can be understood only by reference to the role which they play in the overall system. (See Lyons 1977a: 50–6 for discussion of these and