

Analyzing Discourse for the Enlightenment of Advanced Learners

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1. Introduction.

Hatch (1992) says “Discourse analysis is the study of the language of communication—spoken or written”(p.1). Although it is often done for its own sake, and, as Hatch points out, can be done in different ways, I believe it can be used to help students see how communication can best be achieved or why it might break down. In this paper I shall examine examples of authentic spoken discourse, in conversation and interview situations, discourse from that grey area of combined written and spoken dialogue in a television play, and from written discourse with a Japanese flavour.

2. Authentic Speech, Everyday Situation.

In the following example, spoken in standard English, the speakers were me (initial ‘T’) and a girlfriend (initial ‘K’). I have imposed punctuation, but since I was one of the participants, I believe this was clear. What is missing from this item of discourse is the context, the paralanguage, the supersegmentals, and the actions of the speakers while speaking. However, the main interest in examining the example is in trying to find the illocutionary force behind the words, that is, the underlying meaning. People often play what amount to mind games with each other and words on the surface often do not reveal the full meaning. Hatch shows how speech act

theory can help uncover this.

Example :

T : It reminds me of that French restaurant.

K : Which French restaurant?

T : Any French restaurant.

K : The one we went to?

T : Any French restaurant. They always use a lot of butter.

K : I'm sorry.

T : No, it's O.K. I'm just saying it reminds me.

Firstly, there is nothing to tell anyone reading this what 'it' refers to. This pronoun is neither used anaphorically nor cataphorically here. It is not a dummy subject. No exercise on cohesion would recover the meaning. If I give the context - that the speakers were at home having dinner - there is a good chance 'it' (a certain dish) can be guessed at. To more interesting points. K's first question gets a vague, rather unhelpful answer, and comes close to flouting Grice's (1975) conversational maxims of clarity and quantity (explained in Hatch) since it's too brief. I was well aware the question "Which French restaurant?" carried an illocutionary force of 'Why does it remind you?' as well as the obvious referential question. T seems to be manipulating Grice's maxims rather like the father speaking to his son in Hemingway's *Ten Little Indians*, as analyzed by Dali, quoted in Coulthard (1985, pp.181-2). This would be clearer if I included in the transcription marks to indicate the few seconds of silence after T's first answer : as if he were challenging K, refusing to speak until she asked another question. Later I discussed the conversation with K, and she said my neutral expression, neutral visual paralinguistic, made it hard for her to guess what I was

getting at, although she had an inkling.

Next time T gives the same answer but then elaborates on it. There is a complaint in the next utterance. They always use a lot of butter carries an illocutionary force of 'you know I don't usually like so much butter in cooking', and perhaps a perlocutionary force of 'Please don't use so much butter when cooking for me in the future'. K understood these underlying functions because she knows T well ; she remembers, too, that T has made these requests explicitly before, so she says 'I'm sorry'. But T has no wish to spoil what is nevertheless a very nice meal, knows he's made his point and retreats. By ending with 'I'm just saying it reminds me', T is denying the upshot of what he has said before. Although the relationship is intimate, T uses an indirectness of speech which is most often used with those in 'bulge' relationships, which Wolfson (1989) shows is the state of most of our human relationships. Partly this is because he does not want an argument, and partly because he doubts he has the right to tell K how to cook, one of the felicity conditions for an order (Cook, 1989).

T was also following the rules of politeness, as devised by Lakoff (1973) and explicated in Tannen (1984). T's indirect complaint was an example of not imposing and his last comment was shifting to an emphasis on rule 3, camaraderie. Tannen says,

People prefer not to make themselves perfectly clear because they have interactional goals served by the Rules of Rapport that supersede the goal of clarity (Lakoff 1976). Those higher interactional goals may be subsumed under the headings Defensiveness and Rapport. They correspond, respectively, to a camaraderie strategy and a distance/deference strategy. Thus I may prefer not to let you know just what I mean, so that if you don't like it, I can deny (even to myself) that I meant any

such thing (p.14).

Tannen makes the point that being able to use these politeness forms is as important as stylistic variables such as syntax and lexical choice. She says “speaking styles are simply ‘ways of speaking’”(p.8), and “style is not a sophisticated skill learned late or superimposed on previously acquired linguistic forms. Rather it is learned as an integral part of linguistic knowledge”(p.10). It would seem vital then, that ‘style’ is taught to language learners. Sometimes a certain intonation when uttering one word can completely alter the way an addresser (the person who originates the message) is received by an addressee (the person to whom the message is addressed). This was shown in the study by Gumperz (1978), cited in Tannen, of Indian women working at a cafeteria in London. Their ‘Gravy’ with a falling intonation instead of the British women’s rising one led to a negative reaction from customers. As Cook (1989) says, “an error of style can so antagonize an interlocutor that it will negate the positive effects of lower level accuracy”(p.128).

The example above was clearly a conversation: it was unplanned, there was no pre-determined topic, the situation was loosely structured socially, it was unaided by writing and reciprocal with frequent turn-taking. K passed the turn two out of three times by asking a question, which is explicit and easily understood by second language learners. T took those turns offered but passed them by pausing, in fact stopping his speech, and by use of paralinguistic, by eye contact with his addressee. This is not so easy to teach, but recordings or transcripts can be used to help students identify native speakers conversation management, and then to discuss them, as Cook suggests (p.118).

Sometimes mutual knowledge and the power of paralinguistic can

obviate the need for any words at all. I was once teaching at a school which had classrooms leading off from one another. To get to mine I had to go through a colleague's. A Japanese teacher was running late in my room, so the teacher in the room where I was waiting said I should let her know. My colleague, an Australian, saw me open the door and about twenty seconds later close it. He wondered why I'd said nothing. I told him I hadn't needed to: I'd opened the door, the Japanese teacher had looked up, I'd smiled, raised my eyebrows to the clock behind her on the wall, she'd turned, looked at the clock, turned back and nodded. I knew she'd understood. Within a minute she and her students were leaving the room. To have said anything would have felt heavy-handed. My Australian colleague was convinced that most North Americans and Australians would have felt the need to speak. This may or may not be true, and some English people would have spoken, but these are points which can be exploited in our teaching to compare cultural similarities (for example, between English and Japanese), and differences (with Americans perhaps). This was an example of communication where ellipsis was 100 per cent and the whole discourse covered by facial paralanguage and a shared knowledge (that her class should finish at 4pm when mine was due to start), and the purpose was a directive for which the felicity conditions were in order (Cook, 1989, p.39).

3. Authentic Speech in Interviews.

Coulthard (1985) says "Sacks has observed that the first question one must ask of any utterance is whether it is intended seriously"(p.48). So, he says, "the tone, manner or spirit, or 'key' as Hymes terms it"(Coulthard, *ibid.*) is vital to understanding. Coulthard gives the example where "'how marvelous' uttered with a 'sarcastic' tone is taken to mean the opposite" (*ibid.*). In transcription this would require subjective interpretation. On

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other occasions assumed mutual world knowledge - between the addresser, addressee and perhaps receiver - signals whether the utterance is serious or whether it is a deliberate flouting of Grice's maxim of quality for humorous effect. Let's consider this exchange :

A : Do you get much fan mail?

B : We get 2,000 letters a day.

C : We're going to answer every one of them.

World knowledge tells us the truthfulness of C's utterance is very unlikely, and if said in a certain 'key', C would highlight the humour of such an indirect promise. If it were said in a sincere 'key', it could mislead some naive receivers into thinking how wonderful B and C must be. More detailed context, immediately activating our schemata and knowledge, would make the likelihood of C's seriousness clearer : the dialogue took place in 1964, B was Ringo Starr and C was John Lennon. The Beatles' often witty ripostes around this time provide a wealth of material which is fun to study for the way Grice's maxims are deliberately flouted. When the maxim of manner is violated, it can create confusion and leave the addressee and receiver believing she or he heard something deep when it's nonsense, for example,

Q : Why are your speaking voices different from your singing voices?

George Harrison : We don't have a musical background.

Sometimes people deliberately misinterpret utterances, especially questions, so they can avoid answering something they do not wish to or just to be amusing. John Lennon does this with the word 'them' in the following

exchange :

Q : How important is it to succeed here (in Paris)?

Paul McCartney : It is important to succeed everywhere.

Q : The French have not made up their minds about The Beatles. What do you think of them?

John Lennon : Oh, we like The Beatles.They're gear.

This is difficult to convey fully in transcription and clearly requires interpretation. However, it could be used in teaching by asking students to analyze the words and discuss the importance of stress and intonation on the right words. Most people are more likely to abide by the cooperative principles in conversation than The Beatles were sometimes inclined to in interviews in the early 1960s. Students could then be asked to think about why people might not always cooperate.

4. A Scene from a TV Play.

Tannen (1984) suggests an understanding of coherence in conversation “may grow out of an analysis of conversation in the spirit and tradition that has hitherto been applied to literary language”(p.153). She says that in regard to rhythm, surface linguistic features and contextualization, “conversation can be seen to exhibit features that have been identified as quintessentially literary”(p.154). Widdowson, (1979 and 1992), argues forcefully for students learning to analyze literary language : he says even a structurally based language course “must somewhere make provision for the teaching of interpretative procedures, since not otherwise will learners be prepared for their encounter with actual discourse”(1979, p.159). He was making the point for studying literary discourse in its most extreme re-

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presentational form, poetry, but I believe it is also valid for more accessible forms. Good playwrights can capture the feel of authentic discourse and yet often present it in a way which is usually more eloquent, more 'idealized' than truly authentic discourse. However, it is usually more natural than dialogues in textbooks, making it an excellent model for learners to observe and perhaps aim for. In addition, it is potentially useful for teaching because, as Tannen (1984) points out, "literary language makes increased and artful use of features that are spontaneous in face-to-face conversation because both rely for their effect on processes of subjective knowing, that is, speaker/writer-audience involvement"(p.158). I transcribed the following from a scene in Alan Bennett's *'Blunt'*, a television play about the English aristocrat who spied for the Soviet Union :

Blunt arrives at a house in the suburbs, and rings the front door bell.

Chubb answers it.

Chubb : Well done, come in.

Blunt : One hopes this isn't going to be the form, contacting me at work. Your predecessor was more discreet.

C : (laughs). Yes, so I understand, Anyway, you found us, that's the important thing. Do you know Purley?

B : No.

C : It's changed. Well, tea? coffee? Or I might be able to track down a sherry.

B : No thank you.

C : Have we ever met before?

B : No.

C : No, I didn't think so. Well, I'm sorry to drag you down here, but I thought we'd better get acquainted. There's no sense in putting off the evil day, as it were. We're not in here, actually. **(moving into a different**

room....)

Allow me. It's my den. **(unclear...)**...I'll just clear the decks a fraction. We don't need this for a start, do we? **(moves sewing machine off the desk.)** Ah, there, that gives us a bit more room to manoeuvre. Now, if I could just take you through some of the basic details. It's as much for my benefit as for yours. Blunt, Anthony, educated at Marlborough, Trinity College, Cambridge. We went through Marlborough last week. Oh, that's a pretty place. It's the kind of place Mrs Chubb likes to stop for a cup of tea.

B : One tends to say MAWLborough.

C : Really? I never knew that. So, I've learnt something already.

Mrs Chubb : Arthur, I'm just going out to the end. Nothing you want?

C : No. **(laughs)** Course you never married, did you Sir Anthony?

B : No.

C : Just thought I might have missed it. Sir Anthony, would you care to look through these photographs. Tell me if there's anyone there that you recognize.

B : **(looking at pictures)** No.No.No.

There are many things to examine in this extract : it could be used to help teach certain lexical items and idioms, cultural behaviour, British class differences, to examine illocution and perlocution - for example, at "course you never married.....just thought I might have missed it" - and so on. But to start from the top, as it were, we can look at the dialogue with reference to adjacency pairs (McCarthy, 1985). Chubb's first words are congratulatory and welcoming ; they're phatic. One would normally expect something like 'thank you' to be the first words of someone entering the house and responding to "Well done, come in." Instead Blunt gets straight to the point,

letting his irritation known, even though his choice of words and grammar, -his 'style'-is very polite, even precious. Despite that, what he says at that time jars the ear of a native speaker and would also be interesting for language learners to consider. Compare this with Chubb's 'nice guy' act. He helps maintain this by using cohesive expressions, which Blakemore (1992) says are "Linguistic devices for creating connectivity"(p.84). For example, Chubb says "*Anyway*, you found...", "*Well*, tea?...", "...in here, *actually*", "*Ah*, there", "*Now*, if...". We could use this discourse in a language classroom to show the importance of these cohesion words in creating a certain, probably positive, impression. It is important to bear in mind though, as McCarthy (1991) points out, that just because a text is cohesive it does not mean "that a lot more mental work has to go on for the reader to make it coherent"(p.27). Blunt's curt 'no's to several questions also create a certain impression: he is cooperating at the minimum level of politeness without being uncooperative. There is an example of a side-sequence, albeit a completely coherent one. It occurs through a change of topic and, in the play, by a change of tone in the voice: "We went through Marlborough last week...." Chubb comes back to his main topic when he asks Blunt to look at some photographs. There is also an example of an unclear utterance, which can be used to show students not to worry if they do not hear every word someone says to them, as long as they catch the important ones.

5. Written Discourse/Genre

To look at genre I found all these examples of written discourse on pencil cases used by Japanese schoolchildren. They were all 'Made in Japan' and there are certain discoursal features which seem common to this particular genre.

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1. Hello Kitty

Hearts and flowers brighten my day!

.....

2. Paddington's Pencil Pouch

Paddington was a great believer in marmalade.

At a thousand typewriters they would eventually come up with the complete works of Shakespeare. Paddington.

.....

3. airplane....should have.....comfy seats,

nice meals....good movie.....

but whatever.... S.PAPA S.PAPA

...we need is safety.

.....

4. CAT CATCH

Why don't you take a walk with little cat

.....

5. On the Earth

This Planet is not only for a human

.....

6. Some believe

That plants have senses.

I think so too. EARTH CARE

.....

7. The fish and penguin are very nice friend. It is true!!

.....

8. I flying in the night sky

Today is flying to the moon.

Don't give up!!

Let's consider these in relation to the features listed in Cook (1989, p. 99). The sender must be the writer, probably an employee or contract worker for the addresser, the company which manufactures the pencil cases. The addressees are Japanese schoolchildren, while shopworkers, parents and teachers could all be receivers. The primary function is to attract attention, to be bought. Their sub-functions include an attempt to make the receivers feel good since the language used is positive rather than negative; since English rather than Japanese is used (you can occasionally find French too), there is attention to the notion of 'internationalization', a buzzword in recent years in Japan; and there is a possible attempt at consciousness-raising of ecological issues, especially recently. Another function seems to be the use of language consciously in a representational way rather like poetry (Widdowson, 1992). Unfortunately, the grammatical deviations are genuine errors (as we shall see), though there is a more poetic deviation in lexical collocation, for instance #1 "a great believer in marmalade". Examples #6 and #8 are even arranged like poems, especially #6 with 'That', which introduces a relative clause, having a capital 'T', which would not be normal in straightforward referential discourse.

The situation is firstly a shop, then to be used at home and at school, with the physical form a pencil case made of nylon or some other hard-wearing softish fabric, which necessitates the brevity of the discourse. Not all have titles, though some have brand names as titles, (Hello Kitty, S. PAPA), short snappy slogans (Cat Catch), or occasionally a real title (Paddington's Pencil Pouch). The last two examples both use alliteration which fall under 'pronunciation', much as phonological features are an integral part of poetry, also a primarily written discourse. The most common

internal structure is a short sentence or two preceded or followed by a brand name or slogan. There is little in the way of cohesion, though #3 has “but whatever...”. Grammar is most interesting because although idioms and colloquial lexical items are used (for example, “comfy seats” in #3, and “come up with” in #2), it is clear that most of the discourse would not have been written by a native English speaker. Only #1 and #6 are fine grammatically. The mistakes reflect frequent problems Japanese learners of English have, that is in the use of prepositions (#2), articles and generic plurals (#3, #4, #5, #7) and confusion between simple and continuous present tenses (#8). A common way to attract attention and produce an uplifting tone is with the use of exclamation marks or capital letters. Under graphology comes the point that although of course the pencil cases are machine-made, the discourse is usually in hand-written rather than typed appearance, clearly to give it a personal, friendly touch. The fairly simple language used on these commonplace products could be used in the classroom to draw students attention to the above discorsal features. Finding the grammar mistakes (especially for Japanese students) could certainly be a worthwhile task.

Generally, although it may be optimistic to hope that learners will put many of the aspects of discourse into immediate effect, I believe it is beneficial to raise learners’consciousness as to their importance and significance.

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