Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research
Ahmed Zabana University
Faculty of Letters and Foreign Languages
Department of English

وزارة التـــعليـــــم العالـــي و البحث العلمي
جامعة الشهيد احمد زبانة _ غليزان
معهـــــــد الأداب و اللغـــــــات
قســـــم اللـــغة الإنجـــــليزية

Academic year : 2019 / 2020.

Level: Master 1

Semester: 1st (2022-2023)

Time: Online

Course focus: Discourse Analysis

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Lecture: Discourse processing

Lecture objectives

By the end of this lecture, learners will be:

- Familiar with the different strategies implemented by readers/listeners when attempting to make sense of a piece of discourse.

As it has been established so far, discourse analysis is about making sense of the world around us and making sure the world around us makes sense of us through discourse. Our ability to understand any given discourse does not solely depend on the "syntactic structure and lexical items used in a linguistic message". There are multiple cases in which we can understand every single lexical item used in a text but still fail to infer the message behind it (see example 1). On the other hand, we may encounter a text/discourse which consists of "fragments" of language with no explicit linguistic connections but still succeed in inferring the meaning they convey (see example 2). In order to make sense of those fragments we, first, assume that they somehow make a coherent entity even with the absence of linguistic connections and second, we bring to the interpretation our knowledge of the various formats in which information is presented.

Example 1

> Within five minutes, or ten minutes, no more than that, three of the others had called her on the telephone to ask her if she had heard that something had happened out there.
>
> (Tom Wolfe, 1981 as quoted in Brown and Yule 1988)

Example 2

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Academic year : 2019 / 2020.

M1 Students
Discourse analysis session
Wednesday, February 26th, 2020
9:30 a.m. – 11 a.m.
D05
A.AISSA ASSIA

In example 1, although we do understand the literal meaning of every single lexicon used in the message, we do not understand what the meaning behind it is; who are they? Who is she? What does out there refer to? And so on. Whereas in example 2 the fragments used in the discourse do not share any apparent linguistic link. Yet, on assuming that they do represent a coherent message and on relying on the fact that the format of the message is similar to that of notes posted in departments, for students, the readers can easily infer that Master 1 students will have a session of discourse analysis on the date and time mentioned in the note with the teacher whose name is signed at the bottom. Some may go even further and assume that it is a makeup session since the regular sessions would not need special announcements.

Other formats which we get acquainted with through our experiences may include, but not limited to, poems, different newspaper announcements such as real estate announcements, birthday announcements, condolences announcements, road signs, and public signs in general.

According to Brown and Yule (1988) a reader/ listener attempts to pinpoint a writer's/ speaker's intended meaning behind a piece of discourse relying of several strategies. These strategies include:

- Assumption of coherence (which is explained above)
- Local interpretation
- Principles of analogy
- General features of context
- Regularities of discourse structure
- Regular features of information structure organization
- His/her background knowledge of the world

Local interpretation and principles of analogy

Local interpretation principle dictates on the hearer/reader "not to construct a context any larger than he needs to arrive at an interpretation" (Brown and Yule, 1988, p59). So if someone asks you to give them "the

pen" or "the paper", you will likely give them the nearest pen and/or paper to you and not all/any pen and paper available in the whole area where you are.

Relying on the principle of local interpretation and co-text allows us to limit the context of interpretation of what is being said.

Example

> The man sitting on the bench contemplated the set of trees blocking sunlight, offering a much needed breeze and how it was full of the familiar scents. Taking a deep breath, he could recognize all the smells, those of joggers, food-vending vans and the squirrels jumping from one branch to another. He could only refer to it as the signature scent of this place.
>
> On his balcony, he picked up his puppy, went back inside and closed the window.

All the events described in the passage above, with the exception of the last sentence, are assumed to have occurred within the same temporal and locational setting. Readers will also assume that the pronoun "he" in the last sentence refers to the same man who was sitting in the park (a park and not a forest), that the writer at the end moves to a different scene which is probably the man's house.

The principle of local interpretation is what allows readers to come to the conclusion that the deep breath taken by the man was while he was still sitting on the bench and not two or three months later. In other words, locational, temporal and objects referred to in a given discourse are to be taken as constant by the hearer/listener unless stated otherwise by the writer/speaker. Readers will also refrain from attempting to visualize what kind of trees is referred to by the author or what kind of footwear those joggers are wearing, their age or gender. Brown and Yule (1988, p 60) explain it as follows:

> Local interpretation probably relates to another strategy which instructs the hearer/reader to do as little processing as possible, only to construct a representation which is sufficiently specific to permit an interpretation which is adequate for what the hearer judges the purpose of the utterance to be.

The little processing referred to in the quote above is the result of readers' recurring to their past experiences to help predict and interpret a piece of discourse. This process is known as the principle of analogy which is "readers' ability to utilize their knowledge of the world and their past experiences of similar events in interpreting the language which they encounter" (Brown & Yule, 1988, p 61). This principle goes hand in hand with the principle of local interpretation, for it is our past experiences of similar events/language which allows us to construct expectations and hypotheses about what are likely to be relevant aspects of context. This view is supported by works in cognitive psychology illustrating that individuals tend to generalize over a set of experiences to come up with categorization of types of experiences. Similarly, listeners and readers generalize over a number of contexts to come up with a

categorization of "genres". They will also end up establishing what Van Dijk calls "an assumed normality of the world" which though is part of our unconscious expectations; it serves as a point of reference to make sense of the world around us. For instance, we all know what to expect when attending a lecture, what topics are likely to be discussed among close friends, how a fairytale would end, what a letter of apology should contain and so on. Thus, we build a repertoire of regularities of the world/communicative events and it will be our purpose to try to find them everywhere around us. Yet, not all our expectations are to be met. Flouting these expectations can be either unintentional (think of cultural differences) or intentional (think of a literary work where the protagonist starts old in age then gets younger over the span of the story. Most intentional flouting of our expectations is usually for stylistic and aesthetic reasons).

General features of context

Many scholars and discourse analysts attempted to identify the fundamental features of contexts necessary for interpretation. One of these attempts is Hymes' SPEAKING model.

Setting and scene: The setting refers to the time and place while scene describes the environment of the situation.

Participants: who is the addresser? Who is the addressee? What kind of relationship does the two share?

Ends: what are the goals and the actual outcomes of the speech act?

Act sequence: what happens first, second, and so on?

Key: the cues indicating the type of the speech event. Is it formal? Informal? It determines the tone of the speech event.

Instrumentalities: the form used to convey the message.

Norms: the conventions of appropriateness.

Genre: the kind/type of the speech act.

References

Brown, G., & Yule, G. (1988). *Discourse analysis.* Cambridge: University Press.