
A Sociolinguistic Approach to Discourse Analysis

Pavinee Navarat
 Chulalongkorn University
 Language Institute

Abstract

This paper discusses two main approaches to discourse analysis, namely the cognitive psychological approach and the sociolinguistic approach. For the first orientation in the study of discourse, research based on Kaplan's hypothesis has been drawn upon to show that, for second language study, discourse analysis based purely on textual analysis is not adequate. An approach more relevant to second language learning and teaching is to conduct research based on the sociocultural perspective. Issues such as sociocultural conventions of language use and nativization are discussed to substantiate this assertion.

Several approaches in the study of discourse exist, such as the generative-semantic approach, the tagmemic approach, the systematic approach, the cognitive psychological approach and the sociolinguistic approach (Grabe, 1984 ; Houghton & Hoey, 1982 ; Kachru, 1985). Two broad orientations, however, have prominently emerged from the study of discourse, namely the cognitive psychological approach and the sociolinguistic approach. The former is primarily involved with the study of relations between language units, conceptual units, retention, comprehension, production and mental representation of knowledge (van Dijk & Kintsch, 1983). Proponents of this approach, also termed the schema theoretic approach (Freedle, 1979), assert that a text does not carry any meaning. It only provides a guideline or direction for the audience, be they hearers or readers, so that they can subsume and construct the intended meaning from their own conceptual know-

ledge. A schema is thus a description of a particular class of concepts and is composed of a hierarchy of schemata embedded within schemata.

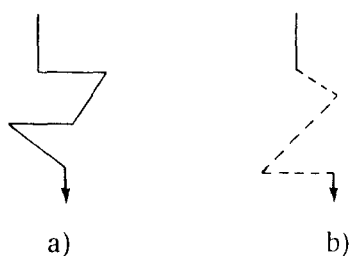
On the other hand, proponents of the sociolinguistic approach view the text from a sociocultural perspective. Sociolinguists such as Gumperz (1982) deem that discourse analysis is the study of language in actual use in different contexts, by different people, and for different purposes. The emphasis is placed on the interpretation of the text in relation to factors such as participants, topic, setting, and formal and functional aspects of language.

The cognitive psychological approach

Discourse analysis based on the cognitive psychological approach involves research which attempts to prove that differences within the internal logics of languages lead to the development of

different rhetorics. Kaplan (1966, 1983), for instance, argued that in English expository prose a dominantly linear paragraph organization exists at the macro-discourse level. On the other hand, other languages show a different, less linear or non-linear organization at the macro level. In addition, in comparing English and Japanese written discourse, Hinds (1980, 1983) claimed that logical organization - to the extent that cultures nurture different systems of logic - provides significant points of contrast for cross-linguistic studies of paragraph structure. He, as well as Christensen (1965) and Jones (1983), is of the opinion that expository paragraphs in English are structured and that they follow the linear organization proposed by Kaplan. However, Japanese expository prose is organized by means of the return to a theme or topic at the initiation of each perspective or subtopic termed as the "return to baseline theme" style (Hinds, 1983).

Along this kind of analysis, Kachru (1983) and Pandharipande (1983) proposed that the paragraph organization in Hindi and Marathi have a spiral-like structure and a circular structure, respectively. In comparing English and Thai written discourse, Navarat (1985) found that expository prose written in Thai shows a less linear organization ; in other words, its logical development is more or less cyclic and non-sequential. With respect to paragraph organization in German, Clyne (1985) argues that it tends to be less linear than the paragraph organization in English but more digressive as illustrated below :



In the a) type, there is more freedom to digress and to introduce "extraneous" materials; whereas, the b) type - although similar to the a) type - has more of a parenthetical amplification and an abrupt stop. This, then, indicates

that linearity is not regarded as the norm in German written discourse.

In spite of the research conducted in the area of paragraph organization, there still lacks strong evidence to support Kaplan's hypothesis that each language and each culture has a paragraph order unique to itself, and that part of the learning of a particular language is the mastering of its logic system (Kaplan, 1966). Analysis of some English texts showed that the linear organization is not manifested in all pieces of exposition in English. On the contrary, it has been found that native speakers of English use a circular paragraph structure, too. Likewise, non-native speakers of English use a linear organization, that is, they start off with a topic sentence which is followed by major and minor support and the summary or conclusion (Kachru, 1985). This finding does not pertain only to Indian English but also to other non-native varieties such as Japanese English and Thai English (Hinds, 1980; Navarat, 1985).

Therefore, it seems that the use of a linear progression of thought in written discourse is dependent upon the function of the particular discourse and the preference of the writer. In addition, it is only a matter of degree. That is to say, native speakers of English may use the linear organization more in pieces of exposition than in any other kind of discourse and they may use it more than non-native speakers of English. Thus second language instruction should not be only based on the notion that linguistically and culturally defined interpretations of discourse cause difficulties for non-native speakers. A more fruitful endeavour seems to be to undertake research in the area of the relationship between sociolinguistics and discourse analysis because such analysis would yield more insight into discourse interpretation which in turn could be applied to second language teaching and learning.

The sociolinguistic approach

Based upon the sociolinguistic approach, the interpretation of a text depends by and large

on factors such as participants, topic, setting, and formal and functional aspects of language. A relevant and insightful area of research for discourse analysis, in particular contrastive discourse analysis, is that related to sociocultural knowledge and roles in discourse interpretation. Sociocultural knowledge plays an integral role in interpreting texts, besides the knowledge of the conventions of language use. In other words, textual competence and cultural competence are essentially required in interpreting a discourse (de Beaugrande, 1980). The notion of a two-way relationship between the organization of language and the organization of social behaviour is valid because in everyday communication one is not concerned so much with the differing structures of two languages as with how to say the appropriate things in a particular context and situation, as well as with how to interpret them appropriately.

Kachru's analysis (1985) of texts written by a native and non-native speaker of English, that is, texts written in Indian English and British English, showed that sociocultural variables are essential in the interpretation of discourse. Although both texts are grammatically acceptable, the text written in Indian English is considered inappropriate by the standards of a native speaker. This is because some linguistic features that have been used are considered to be too colloquial by most native speakers of English to be incorporated into expository prose. In this case, a non-restrictive modifier, namely, "a young rebel with a brain like a burning blue flame," was used to modify a proper name. The use of this linguistic feature is "too ornamental to be appropriate for the objective, impersonal style generally associated with expository prose in English" (Kachru, 1985:78). This style, however, is accepted in Indian English writing.

Further examples which support the different conventions of language use are found in the use of cohesive devices in both varieties. While Indian English uses the phrase "such a thing" as a transition marker

in expository prose, the native variety does not accept the use of correlatives to achieve textual cohesion. Furthermore, differences in the use of cohesive devices such as "therefore" and "on the other hand" indicate the different convention of thematization in both varieties.

Generally, the discourse style found in non-native varieties of English (written mode) comprise features such as long sentences, one sentence paragraphs, figurative description, pretentious words (or big words), and wordiness. In Thai English wordiness or redundancy is considered to be an elegant style because the author has the opportunity to use "more" words (Chutisilp, 1984). This also holds true for African English. Chishimba (1984) claimed that big words and wordiness convey the importance of the message. Hence in African English discourse wordiness and Latin words are commonly used to evoke the reader's interest. For the purpose of effective discourse comprehension and interpretation, as well as cross-cultural communication, more research should be undertaken to examine the typology of the conventions of language use.

In addition to the different conventions of language use that participants of different speech communities have, culture-bound concepts pose obstacles in the interpretation of texts. Interpretation here not only refers to the decoding of a text but also involves the imposition of one's own knowledge, experience, beliefs and expectations. For instance, a non-native who is not familiar with the American culture may not be able to interpret the following:

...a new generation of gay parents has produced the first-ever "gayby boom." The gay community's goal is "integration" - just as it was with Martin Luther King.

Newsweek (March 12, 1990)

Conversely, a non-native speaker of Thai or one who does not know the Thai language and culture well may not be able to understand the following sentence:

Or "standing in two boats at the same time" (an old Thai adage), as one political reporter put it when trying to describe the Democrat Party's stance during the May tragedy....

Bangkok Post (July 24, 1992)

Expressions such as "gayby boom", "Martin Luther King" and "standing in two boats at the same time" have meanings which are culture-bound. Likewise expressions such as "social welfare" and "social security" have their own special meanings in different cultures. For example, in Indian English they are associated with large wedding expenses. The relationship between these words may be incomprehensible for someone who is not well-acquainted with the social traditions of that culture. In other words, in the interpretation of texts which have culture-bound concepts attached to them, knowledge of the context of social traditions, cultural values and religious practices and their relationship to the status of the family in that particular society is required.

Following the sociolinguistic approach to discourse analysis, Lowenberg (1984) examined the non-native varieties of English in Southeast Asia and discovered that they have undergone systematic changes at different levels in order to fit into the sociocultural norm of their region. This phenomenon has been referred to as nativization, which is especially evident in the institutionalized variety where English is not solely used as an international language but also as an intranational language for government, education, business and inter-ethnic communication. Due to nativization, some linguistic features may appear to be unacceptable or inappropriate, even if not ungrammatical, to the native speakers. However, they are considered acceptable in their new sociocultural settings. Hence, in the interpretation of non-native varieties, knowledge of sociocultural factors are required.

Basing his analysis on Platt and Weber's speech continuum (1980), Lowenberg addressed the issue of sociolects (acrolect,

mesolect and basilect) in regard to Singapore-Malaysian English. He discussed the relationship between the formal and functional aspects of language, as well as describing the settings in which these features were used. For example, code-mixing and code-switching between the different sociolects are used in communication between people of different status. That is to say, children use the acrolect, the formal style, when speaking to their parents so as to show their respect and the basilect, the informal style, when talking to their friends. From these types of discourse it is possible to determine the role of the participants as well as the setting. In addition, the linguistic features give clues to the function of the language and show the relationship between the participants.

According to Lowenberg (1984), in order to preserve ethnic identity, there has been a shift in the goals of language teaching. In educational institutions this has been away from traditional goals based on the style of Victorian English towards that of the acrolect. Thus instead of trying to approximate the native variety of English, Singapore-Malaysian English is deviating more and more from the "established" variety. While some native speakers may not accept these deviations, or more positively called "innovations," Singaporeans and Malaysians continue to communicate in this manner in order to express their identity, informality, familiarity and rapport. Therefore, the audience that is not part of these communities or shares at least some sociocultural knowledge with these people may have difficulty in understanding and interpreting these nativized features which can be found in both the micro and macrostructure.

Nativization which can be categorized into nativization of context, cohesion and cohesiveness, and rhetorical strategies affect the degree of difficulty in the interpretation of discourse for non-native speakers of a particular variety. Therefore, the process of nativization should be minimized if the goals of universal communication and intelligibility

are to be achieved. The process of nativization, however, should be encouraged in so far as it expresses the participant's desire to gain national identity, especially in the case where English is used for intranational purposes.

All in all, the aforementioned examples have illustrated that sociocultural conventions of language use play an essential part in discourse analysis. Thus, there is really a need to take seriously into account the varying linguistic and cultural conventions found in the non-native varieties of English. Instead of considering them ungrammatical or inappropriate, they should be accepted as effective devices for successful communication within the sociocultural setting.

Conclusion

The sociolinguistic approach to discourse analysis has given insights into the issue of text interpretation based on factors such as participants, topic, setting, and formal and functional aspects of language. As long as "writers write with an accent" (Nelson, 1984) and readers refer to their experience and background knowledge for interpretation, the sociolinguistic approach to discourse analysis remains essential and, therefore, should be pursued in second language research.

Furthermore, sociocultural conventions

of language use play a significant role not only in the written but also in the spoken mode. Different languages and different cultures exert different speech acts due to different cultural norms and assumptions. Thus, research of speech acts should also focus on the cultural variables.

Similar to speech acts which differ from culture to culture and from language to language, the Gricean maxim of quantity, quality, relevance and manner (which is applicable both to spoken and written discourse) should be viewed from a cultural perspective as well. Each culture has its own viewpoint of the notions regarding the cooperative principle. It makes propositions and draws implications based on its sociocultural conventions. That is to say, the belief system (e.g. religious and social) and institutions (i.e. a particular ritual) are taken into account.

This then raises the question regarding the notion of communicative competence. Instead of looking at communicative competence from the viewpoint of a native speaker, consideration should be given to communicative competences in the non-native varieties. This, in turn, would have an impact on the goals of language teaching and learning, and it would open awareness to the research of second language acquisition.

The Author

Pavinee Navarat is teaching English at Chulalongkorn University Language Institute.

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