Discourse analysis

Ágoston Tóth
What is discourse?

A “stretch of language – oral or written – which has been produced as the result of an act of communication and perceived to be meaningful, unified and purposive.”
(Murcia & Olshtain 2000:237)

“A set of utterances that constitute a speech event”
(O’Grady)
Sentence vs. utterance

Sentence: syntactically well-formed sequences which make the speaker / listener / reader realize that a well-formed sentence has been produced/heard/seen.
Can be observed in writing or in speech.

Utterance: any instance of linguistic expression produced by a speaker / heard by a listener. In speech: bounded by silence.
The term most often refers to spoken language, but it can also describe written utterances (usu. sentences).
What is discourse analysis?

„The study of language in use that extends beyond sentence boundaries.”
It covers spoken as well as written discourse.
It may entail a cognitive and social perspective on language use and communication.
(Murcia & Olshtain 2000:4)

≠ language use (pragmatics), but does rely on pragmatics as well as sociolinguistics, cognitive science, other linguistic and non-linguistic disciplines
What is discourse analysis?

„The field that deals with the organization of texts, ways in which parts of texts are connected, and the devices used for achieving textual structure”
(O’Grady 456)

not the best def., but acceptable in the test
(assuming that “spoken texts” exist)
Types of discourse #1

Spoken vs. written discourse

Obvious differences:

- Technical perspective: channel of communication
- Human perspective: different physiological processes (speech vs. writing), different sensory modalities
Types of discourse #2

Planned vs. unplanned discourse (Ochs 1979)

Planned:
- prepared speeches
- sermons
- edited/published written work

Unplanned:
- conversations
- informal letters
Types of discourse #3

Context-embedded vs. context-reduced

Most interactions are context-embedded, e.g.
  O a shopping list,
  O discussion of a short story in the classroom

Written discourse usually lacks direct physical context.
Lexical density

How to tell the difference? (Nunan 1993:11)

**written**

„The use of this method of control unquestionably leads to safer and faster trains running in the most adverse weather conditions.”

**spoken**

„You can control the trains this way / and if you do that / you can be quite sure / that they’ll be able to run more safely and more quickly / than they would otherwise / no matter how bad the weather gets”

Lexical density: the number of lexical or content words per clause. Speech: lower density; writing: higher.
Genre

(≠ literary genres!)

Different types of discourse can be identified by their overall shape or generic structure – these are the discourse genres. Language exists to fulfil certain functions and that these functions will determine the overall shape of the discourse.

E.g. sermons, political speeches, casual conversations

Study areas: common features of a genres, distinctive features that set it apart from other genres, the functions that determine the genre.
Cohesion

Cohesive devices establish connections among two or more elements (clauses, utterances) in the discourse.

1. Grammatical ties:
   - reference (usu. anaphorical reference to an NP)
   - ellipsis
   - conjunction
   - substitution

2. Lexical ties
   - synonyms

Discourse anaphora
from http://tractorfeed.com/strictlyspeaking/?p=151
“Natural beauty plays **a starring role** in Santa Monica, and seaside is the perfect vantage from which to watch **the performance**. Early risers will notice that **the show** begins just after sunrise.”

(taken from Murcia & Olshtain 2000:7)

“**first mention**”, new information
anaphoric reference to the first mention (paraphrase can form a lexical tie)
**show** is a **synonym** for **performance** (synonym: a lexical tie)
“I am a working mother with two pre-teens. After dropping them off at school, I have to get right to work. But my children are disorganized and always late. A few times, I have had to turn around and go back home because one or the other forgot something.”

(taken from Murcia & Olshtain 2000:7)

them: anaphoric reference to two pre-teens
but: conjunction expressing counter-expectation
always late: elliptical form of they are always late
one or the other: elliptical form of one child or the other child
More examples of cohesive devices (O’Grady)

1) I know **Grant**. **He** drives a car.
2) Do you know **Farmville** at all?
   a) I’ve never been to **the place**.
   b) I’ve never played **it**.
3) Do you speak French?
   No ___.
4) Do you speak French?
   Yes, I **do**.

The tools that build cohesion in the above examples:
1-2: anaphoric references, 3: ellipsis, 4: substitution
Coherence

Result of top-down planning and organization of the text. Sentences/utterences „hang together” rather than remain a set of unrelated utterances.

e.g. cause-effect relationship or problem-solution pattern in a text establishes coherence
Discourse markers (DMs)

DMs: sequentially dependent elements of discourse that bracket units of talk/text

E.g. uhm, well, you know, I mean, anyway, then, now

They provide an underlying fabric/pattern to the discourse that adds to the meaning at the discourse level.

- Did you enjoy your trip to Farmville?
- Well, uhm, it rained the whole time.

► Answer means no.
► Reason of use: introduces unexpected answer.
Discourse markers

Say, I saw Betty last week. You know, the girl who used to live next door?

The speaker assumes that the listener knows Betty.

John has aphasia. You know, this disease is caused by a damage to the brain.

The speaker assumes that the listener does not know the cause and wants to explain.
and more...
Hungarian DMs (diskurzusjelölők)
Identify the features and the functions

Colvin Run Mill Corn Bread
1 cup cornmeal
1 cup flour
½ teaspoon salt
4 teaspoons baking powder
3 tablespoons sugar
1 egg
1 cup milk
¼ cup shortening (soft) or vegetable oil

Mix together the dry ingredients. Beat together the egg, milk and shortening/oil. Add the liquids to the dry ingredients. Mix quickly by hand. Pour into greased 8x8 or 9x9 baking pan. Bake at 425 degrees for 20-25 minutes.
**Negotiation of meaning**

“The interactional work done by speakers and listeners to ensure that they have a common understanding of the ongoing meanings in a discourse.” (Nunan 1993:122)

Commonly used conversational strategies:
- comprehension checks
- confirmation checks
- clarification requests
Negotiating meaning: points of negotiation

- How do I get to Kensington Road?
- Well you go down Fullarton Road...
- ... past the hospital?
- Yeah, keep going straight, past the racecourse to the roundabout. You know the big roundabout?
- Yeah.
- And Kensington Road’s off to the right.
- What, off the roundabout?
- Yeah.
- Right.

(Nunan 1993:91)
Turn-taking

Adjacency pairs

E.g.
- How are you?
- Fine, and you?

Turn taking is obligatory, if missing: rudeness, lack of attention, deafness, etc.
Turn-taking

**Adjacency pairs** (Murcia & Olshtain 2000:54)

**Offer:** paired with ► acceptance or ► refusal

**Assessment:** ► agreement or ► disagreement

**Blame:** ► denial or ► admission

**Question:** ► expected answer or ► unexpected answ.
Turn-taking

A: Did you enjoy the meal?
B: Did you?
A: Yes.
B: So did I.

A: Are you free tonight?
B: Yes.
A: Like to go to that film?
Turn-taking

Some key issues in turn-taking:

- Timing
- Coding and decoding agreement or disagreement
- Use of discourse markers
O’Grady 451-457 + these slides

References (recommended readings):
Nunan D. (1993) Discourse Analysis