

MICHAEL STUBBS:

*Discourse Analysis: The Socio-linguistic  
Analysis of Natural Language*

Chicago. The University of Chicago Press and Oxford.  
Basil Blackwell Publisher, Ltd., 1983, 272 pages.

As the title indicates, this is a book about discourse, its state as a research topic, its interfaces with sentence linguistics, its problems, and peripherally, its applications. Two conclusions will become abundantly clear as we proceed. One is that discourse analysis is a very messy field indeed. This factor will be confirmed for the reader by the questions which the author raises as well as by those additional vexing questions which the reader will ask as he or she progresses through the pages of this book. The other conclusion is that this book definitely departs from generative theory and Chomskyan influence, leaving them behind as inadequate, although it is done in a much less antagonistic manner than is customary in exchanges of this sort. Ordinarily, a new linguistic view, as it spreads over the academic landscape, is filled with the venom of righteousness. There is none of the usual vitriolic attack in the Stubbs book; perhaps as a result, his arguments against the inadequacy of sentence grammar are all the more telling. They sound plausible; certainly, they are often persuasive.

The book consists of five parts: 1) the introduction; 2) three approaches to discourse analysis; 3) exchange structure; 4) surface cohesion and underlying coherence; and 5) methodology. Some parts of the book repeat and expand earlier portions. Thus, in some measure, it is a textbook for the uninitiated, an introduction to the state of the art for all those who have been mildly curious about a fairly recent new direction in the study of language— a direction which is only partly linguistic.

Part I consists of a single chapter appropriately titled "Introduction." It defines discourse analysis as "the linguistic analysis of naturally occurring connected spoken or written discourse", i.e., language in chunks larger than sentences.

An example of discourse might be a written text or a conversation between two or more people. The reviewer should point out that the strengths of discourse analysis at this juncture lie more with conversational analysis than with written texts of an expository or narrative nature. In addition, discourse is defined in relation to its social contexts, for language in different contexts affects both form and meaning.

Part II, three approaches to discourse analysis, consists of chapters 2, 3, and 4. Chapter 2, by way of introduction to textual study, is devoted almost entirely to the careful analysis of a conversation, identifying many of the characteristics common to transcribed data while at the same time revealing the limitations of studying a single text without the expertise of having studied many such texts. Chapter 3 focuses on language use in a particular setting, that of the classroom. Teachers exert a great deal of discourse understanding in the operation of the classroom, for its rules and shibboleths are all a function of discourse. Students must understand the rules about when they may speak and when they are expected to be quiet, and teachers must know such discourse strategies as getting and holding student attention, getting students to speak or to be quiet as the need arises, and keeping a check on individual students and their progress. Teacher discourse, i.e., teacher language in units larger than sentences, is much different from the language of a sermon or the language of an advertisement, and the task of discourse analysis is to describe these differences. Chapters 2 and 3 are introductions to matters of great interest which lie ahead in this book. The close reading in the manner of a literary scholar of surface features and text organization in chapter 2 is followed in chapter 3 by neglecting the

surface utterances and attending to language function in the manner of an anthropologist. Chapter 4 attempts to analyze discourse syntactically and semantically. It is in this chapter that the reader becomes aware that some aspects of multi-sentenced texts fit neither into syntax nor semantics. It is further obvious that such terms as *well*, *please*, *admittedly* and other sentence adverbs do not work within sentences but across sentences. This is also true of sentence connectors such as *and*, *but*, *if*, *since*, and *because*. A case in point is the adverb (if it is an adverb) *well*. It can be an adjective when contrasted with *ill*. It is notoriously difficult to translate into other languages, and it is poorly explained in dictionaries. It is also largely confined to spoken language, and at the same time it is lexically and syntactically ambiguous. However, as a discourse marker, it can indicate a break in discourse, a shift of topic, or the preface to closing a topic and potentially the whole conversation. In each of these three roles it can only be understood in terms of what precedes, i.e., in terms of discourse. Sentence grammar explanations of *well* are either inadequate or nonexistent. The same inadequacies occur in explaining conjunctions which, by definition, are not a part of a syntactic unit but serve instead to sequence syntactic units by fitting them into a discourse context. *Because*, for example, can serve as a connector for an effect and cause structure, as in Stubbs' example, "He was drowned because he fell off the pier", but it connects assertion and justification in his second example, "He was drunk, because he fell off the pier."

Sentence grammarians continue to look for syntactic and semantic explanations of phenomena such as the above, although Stubbs points out the futility of restricting such terms to either aspect of sentence linguistics. Linguists also disagree on whether linguistic semantics should be restricted to studying literal meaning while ignoring stylistic and metaphorical meaning, irony, conversational implicature, etc. Speech acts are also ignored by sentence grammarians since speech acts are not isolated sentences but utterances in context, while truth value may be nonexistent in the abstract but clearly heralded in a definite context.

There are other problems with sentence grammar, according to Stubbs. For example, the weakness of theoretical linguistic data is obvious to everyone, and linguistics must ultimately come to grips with real language, not idealizations and the musings of theoreticians. The demise of clearcut confidence in grammaticality, and its connection with acceptability in context on the one hand, and the performance-competence distinction on the other, are only a few of the difficult issues which Stubbs addresses. The reader may wish to argue that this in-house conflict is only a struggle for territoriality, with both sentence grammarians and discourse analysts wishing to lay claim to the grey area which is conceivably neither syntax nor semantics nor discourse. Throughout his discussion Stubbs continues to point out the inadequacies which will ultimately lead to the decline and fall of sentence grammar.

Part III treats exchange structure, and consists of three chapters. Chapter 5 is titled "A Linguistic Approach to Discourse: Structure and Well-Formedness"; Chapter 6 is "Initiations and Responses"; and Chapter 7 is called "Analysing Exchange Structure". It is obviously the author's intent to introduce his subject gradually and then return to it for more in-depth treatment later. Chapter 5 raises two important questions. One is whether it can be said that discourse has a definable structure. The other question is whether it is possible to speak of discourse well-formedness. Stubbs begins his arguments concerning discourse well-formedness with the caution that well-formedness in phonology and syntax is more problematic than is usually admitted and that it operates only under extreme idealization. Phonotactics, he states, may be more amenable to well—and ill—formedness, although some argue that it is all but impossible to make a phonemic transcript of connected informal speech. Stubbs points out the declining number of adherents to the concept of grammatical well-formedness, but he apparently holds out greater hopes for discourse well-formedness. An argument proffered in favor of discourse well-formedness has to do with non-native speech which might, for example, have incorrect intonation, omit a discourse marker, or the like. Native speakers on an occasion such as this cannot clearly judge what is wrong, and may not understand that a mistake has been made, judging the speaker instead as impolite or brusque. The real reason for the error may lie in faulty cohesion, for example, and thus be a discourse error rather than a syntactical or semantic error. The fact that speakers indulge in self-correction, and the fact of text corrigibility are considered evidence of well-formedness in discourse.

One important discourse feature is the concept of the syntagmatic chain in which one item predicts that other items will or will not occur. For example, whenever two utterances occur next to

each other, hearers will attempt to relate them, for their very proximity implies, or so it seems, that there is a temporal or causal relationship between them. Discourse predictability becomes real when one considers that overhearing one side of a telephone call can tell a person a great deal about what the unheard person at the other end of the line is saying. The structure of discourse, however, is not necessarily similar to the structure of phonology and syntax, even though predictability is undoubtedly the single most important feature of human communication.

That discourse structure is not universal in form, and is therefore culturally determined and must be learned, is shown in the differing interactional structures of telephone calls in the United States and in France. In France it is customary to verify the telephone number, while in the United States it is not. In France, moreover, a telephone call is assumed to disturb the person called, and the caller believes he must excuse himself. In the United States, in contrast, telephone calls have a high cultural value and take precedence over other activities.

Chapter 6 undertakes to explicate in detail the nature of initiations and responses. This chapter is of especial interest to the teacher of foreign languages, for the second language learner must be an active participant in both initiating and maintaining language interaction. These ideas are the underpinnings of conversational competence in a second language, and depend quite as much on social expertise as on cognitive skills. The learner must be forthright in attracting attention, concentrate on what is being said, guess when necessary on content, choose appropriate language for the subject matter and social context, bear in mind the point of the conversation, and cooperate with the other speaker in clearing up misunderstandings. The overwhelming list of skills to be acquired may discourage the previously well-disposed teacher, eager to put discourse concepts to work in the classroom, for there is so much material beyond sentence grammar for the student to learn. At the same time there is so little in the way of textbooks and other classroom aids. However, in one way or another the learner must acquire these skills, with or without the help of the teacher. If the teacher is no more than aware that there is more to language learning than acquiring sentence structure, that alone will be helpful. However, since knowledge is power, greater knowledge is greater power. It is helpful for student and teacher to know that not only must the learner conquer formal sentence structure, but also illocutionary structure, which addresses the intent of the speaker, and the interactive level, which is the discourse level.

The interactive level includes knowledge of such matters as how to open a conversation, and how to get and maintain interest. It also involves turn-taking and the nature of the turn. For example, is the turn an uninterrupted and complete exposition of the speaker's point of view, or is it acceptable to break in with questions and requests for clarification? Cultural rules make this determination. One must also learn how to make evaluative comments, to ask and answer questions, and to close a conversation.

Chapter 7 delves into exchange structure in still more depth, expanding on well-formedness in discourse, with a discussion of notations, basic categories, and informant intuitions in discourse analysis. Interest in this chapter may be limited to those readers who wish to engage in discourse research.

Part IV consists of Chapter 8 on indirection in speech acts, Chapter 9 on the surface of discourse, and Chapter 10 on the propositional analysis of literary texts. Chapter 8 is an important chapter. Everyone learns in greater or lesser measure to estimate the distance between what is said and what is meant. Different cultures and peoples, in the opinion of the reviewer, attach different values to indirection, and this too must be learned by the language learner. The required degree of indirection may first be determined by the culture and then, secondly, by the topic. In some cultures one may address a topic badly; death might be a good example. In other cultures, all such discussion of death may be whispered, hedged, and subject to indirection. The reviewer does not know if the death example is a viable one, but it seems a good candidate for varying degrees of indirection according to cultural mandates. Stubbs explains that the felicitous performance of some speech acts requires that the requisite power has been bestowed on them by some social institution, although anyone lacking that power can still go through the ritual and pretend to sentence, marry, christen, etc. Another important topic, and possibly closer to the hearts of linguists, is the topic of surface markers in discourse. This is the subject matter of Chapter 9. Discourse structure is signaled by surface markers, which are generally

removed in the intuitive and sanitized examples used in books and articles, as Stubbs points out, thus ignoring an important aspect of discourse. This chapter also allows for more discussion of turn-taking, and the introduction of notions such as prefaces, accept, acknowledge, and endorse. Understanding these surface signals will aid both teacher and foreign language learner in understanding how relationships between speakers are displayed in discourse, and how mitigation operates.

Chapter 10 on narrative text analysis does not go beyond a now familiar and unyielding wall which has not yet been breached by linguists nor discourse analysts, in spite of the obvious value of making advances in describing narrative structure. An effective discourse analysis applicable to novels and literary essays hungers for solution.

Part V consists of a single chapter on methodology, which is characterized by the same untidiness exhibited by the field as a whole. Stubbs discusses the lack of accepted discourse procedures, how much data to collect and how to do it, as well as theoretical biases in recording and in transcription. He mentions theoretical sampling, triangulation, and perception. This chapter may do no more than give solace to the researcher, whatever his or her procedural difficulties, for it lets the whole world know in a most refreshing way that there are many inherent difficulties in collecting and handling data. What might surprise some of my colleagues is the fact that the word *statistics* is never mentioned, nor are such ideas as statistical reliability and statistical significance. Sampling, as indicated, is discussed, but hardly in a fashion which would please hardcore statisticians. Perhaps the reaction against statistical studies has spread beyond the discipline of history, where it is presently rampant.

This book will leave most readers frustrated and not a few unsettled. It will probably make generativists angry. Not only does it address an untidy, burgeoning field, but some of this untidiness is reflected in the book itself. Perhaps there is no way to produce a tidy book about an untidy field, but a comprehensive introduction to the field of discourse studies is so important that readers ought to forego extensive criticism until there are other books with which to effectively compare the Stubbs book. In some measure this book closes the gap between sentence grammar and those further understandings necessary to the utilization of language, at least to the degree that these matters are presently understood. Some readers may be anguished at the thought of further travel in the company of discourse adventurers and return, or at least yearn to return, to the relative safety of the generative shore. One does this at his or her peril.

Those foreign language teachers who opt to further inform themselves on the subject matter of discourse analysis will rejoice that some nagging teaching problems have at last been identified within the framework of systematic study, even if they have not always been solved. The inadequacies of sentence grammar in dealing with meaning across sentences is undoubtedly the single most important factor in the growth of discourse analysis.

As an introduction to the field, this book merits more than one reading. For those teachers of foreign languages who were trained in the generative persuasion or who embraced it after they were already established in their career, it provides a fairly comprehensive glance at the field of discourse studies, while at the same time admitting to the tentativeness of its findings. It also points out in a straightforward and generally convincing manner certain areas of language not susceptible to sentence grammar treatment. All this is remarkably helpful to any teacher of English or other languages who earnestly wants to keep informed and who has puzzled over the language learning problems not treated in present textbooks. I commend this book to you even though it does not provide all the answers nor perhaps even ask all the right questions concerning our lacks in foreign language teaching content. Clearly, students still need to learn the old tasks inherent in acquiring phonology, morphology, syntax, and lexicon. But now the consensus is that they need to learn more, making the teachers' task more formidable than ever. This book can help.

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