

**THE IDEA OF COMMUNICATION SEEN FROM THE PERSPECTIVE  
OF CONTEXT, CONTENT AND FORM**

*The following article deals with the discourse and its peculiarities. The article reviews the communicative constituents. The content and function distinction in the form of two discourse units: the propositional content carrying the elementary discourse constituent unit and the extrapropositional discourse operator. The effect any discourse has on its recipients is influenced to some degree by its form, or, rather, structure: whether it is spoken or written. Discourse per se by referring to the activity of reading and interpreting a text makes a coherent (structured and meaningful) understanding of it. The process of confronting from the right angle the linearization problem, where the speaker or writer has to choose a beginning point, influences the hearer's or reader's interpretation of what follows once the initial textual context has been established.*

**Keywords:** communication, discourse, context, language.

**Лачек Мартин. Идея коммуникации с точки зрения контекста, содержания и формы.** В данной статье речь идет о дискурсе и его особенностях. В статье рассматриваются коммуникативные составляющие дискурса. Содержание и функциональные различия в виде двух единиц дискурса: пропозиционный контент, несущий элементарную дискурсивную составляющую единицу и экстрапропозиционный дискурсивный оператор. Воздействие любого дискурса на реципиента зависит в некоторой степени от его формы, или, скорее, структуры: будь-то устной или письменной. Чтение и интерпретация текста делает понимание дискурса последовательным (структурно и по смыслу). Процесс противопоставления, где говорящий или пишущий должен выбрать начальную точку, влияет на интерпретацию слушателем или читателем, первоначальной установки контекста.

**Ключевые слова:** коммуникация, дискурс, контекст, язык

Whatever the form (visual or textual and as opposed to verbal or non-verbal), it is the total set of features, or, strictly speaking, the total layout and not either the text, words or images alone that we associate with what we call discourse although Widdowson (2007: 6) argues that texts alone “do not contain meaning, but are used to mediate it across discourses.” Indeed, that content cannot be separated from its form is noticed by Fairclough (1995: 188) who “would argue that one cannot properly analyse content without simultaneously analysing form, because contents are always necessarily realized in forms, and different contents entail different forms and vice versa. In brief, form is a part of content.” More than that, any text produced in a discursive event, according to the author (1995: 7) can be regarded as a site of tension between centripetal pressures which “follow from the need in producing a text to draw upon given conventions, of two main classes; a language, and an order of discourse – that is, a historically particular structuring of discursive (text-producing) practices”, and centrifugal ones that “come from the specificity of particular situations of text-production, the fact that situations do not endlessly repeat one another, but are, on the contrary, endlessly novel and problematic in new ways.”

Jones (in Bhatia et al., 2008) also draws a distinction between anticipatory and precipitative actions making discourse out of future (by anticipation) and past (by retrospection) actions, respectively while Polanyi (2008) by referring to the linguistic discourse model (LDM) framework reminds her readers of content and function distinction in the form of two discourse units: the propositional content carrying the elementary discourse constituent unit and the extrapropositional discourse operator.

The effect any discourse has on its recipients is influenced to some degree by its form, or, rather, structure: whether it is spoken or written, and not forgetting about any other modalities that can be combined with language. I am not talking here, though, about the lexical words that carry the same or similar meanings to the modal verbs from the classic epistemic modality (concerned with degrees of certainty and possibility) to the root modalities (such as volition, permission or obligation). Multimodal texts regarded as just one of the many modes of communication available for social interaction are accompanied by, and related to, other modes of communication, too (semiotic modes) such as, for instance, gestures, postures, pictures, diagrams, charts, layout, music and architectural design or proxemics (term coined by Hall, an anthropologist, in 1966 to describe a set of measurable distances between people as they interact). As a matter of fact, there are many levels of linguistic production which are involved in discourse design including: word selection, orthography (punctuation, capitalisation, italicisation, paragraphing etc.), syntactic and grammatical features (some constructions might be started and then abandoned in favour of other grammatical constructions – the phenomenon named *anacolutha*, in Fairclough's work of 1995), phonetic and prosodic aspects (rhythmic and temporal features, speeding up and slowing down of

the pace or pause and intonation) as well as, in case of face-to-face interaction: gaze, posture, bodily orientation and the like.

One can also take, as far as the aforementioned relationship between discourse and grammar is concerned, a macropragmatic (Levinson, 1983) – top-down language processing related or microanalytic (Schiffrin, 1987) – bottom-up language processing related approach. Thus, according to McCarthy (2007: 62) “grammar is seen to have a direct role in welding clauses, turns and sentences into discourse”.

In the introduction to their seminal work *The handbook of discourse analysis* Schiffrin, Tannen and Hamilton (2008), having posed a question of what discourse actually stands for, make a reference to Fillmore’s examples, to which I would like to refer to right now and which, as a matter of fact, have appeared as two distinct signs at one of the swimming pools: *Please use the toilets, not the pool* and *Pool for members only*. In my analysis I follow Widdowson’s standpoint (2007: 4) that “[a] text can be defined as an actual use of language, as distinct from a sentence which is an abstract unit of linguistic analysis. We identify a piece of language as a text as soon as we recognize that it has been produced for a communicative purpose.” Fairclough (1995), in a similar vein, it needs to be stressed, apart from its (i.e. any text’s) solely communicative purpose (achieved or not) during the process of social interaction recognizes the simultaneous significance of cognition and representation of the world, too.

But whether a set of sentences does or does not constitute a text depends as well on cohesive relationships within and between the sentences which create texture and according to Martin (2008: 35) “[c]ohesion is one part of the study of texture, which considers the interaction of cohesion with other aspects of text organization. Texture, in turn, is one aspect of the study of coherence, which takes the social context of texture into consideration”. Halliday and Hassan (1976: 2) take the view that “a text has texture and this is what distinguishes it from something that is not a text (...). The texture is provided by the cohesive relation” – cohesive relationships, in turn, created by the underlying semantic relation, need yet to be supplemented by the notion of a register or appropriateness to a particular context of any situation. A register stands for a set of lexical and grammatical features defined by contextual and/or situational characteristics that accompany and help identify any discourse occurring in a particular recurrent situation. For example, speech and writing can be considered as two very general registers but it can also reflect the level of formality (higher register) or informality (lower register) or its degree of technical specificity versus general usage.

Confusion is the right word to describe what the public at the aforementioned swimming pool might experience should the index signs be read and analysed jointly, or, rather, one immediately after another. Indeed, as Schiffrin et al. (2008: 10) maintain

Fillmore’s example captures what we might call the gift of discourse: new meanings are created through the relationship between sentences. But it also illustrates what we might call the curse of discourse: since more than one meaning can be created, how do we decide which meaning is intended, is justifiable, and/or makes the most sense?

Certainly, the main idea of using the toilets and not the pool once a physiological need arises be rightly interpreted by both the pool members and non-members as instructed by the pool management although, following Widdowson (2007: 7), I feel it would not be too difficult to find other real-life situations being able to prove that “no matter how explicitly we think we have textualized what we want to say, there is always the possibility that it will be interpreted otherwise”.

Those who have already tried such a form of entertainment before will undoubtedly, upon reading the signs, refer to amassed amounts of prior knowledge brought in with them which in a communicative exchange may or may not be shared. They, as a matter of fact, might refer to past experience of similar events, too. These, together with the principle of analogy that assumes everything will remain as it was before unless there is given a specific notice that some aspects have changed, and the principle of local interpretation that instructs to do as little processing as possible, will enable them to predict not only what is likely to happen but also what are likely to be the relevant features of the context (the ones which have been necessary and relevant in similar situations in the past). As Stubbs (in Schiffrin et al., 2008: 304), very accurately, puts it “[w]e find a text easy to understand if it consists of familiar topics being talked about in familiar ways. If everything is totally familiar, of course, the text will strike us as boring or full of clichés. (...) Conversely, we find a text difficult to understand if it is lexically and semantically dense (...).”

It would not be a challenging task at all for us to imagine and then try to answer which of the following would have most impact on those not adhering to the pool-environment rules in force: a lifeguard’s reprimand in face-to-face interaction, an announcement made over the Tannoy or the signs we have been talking about – in different shapes, sizes and formats? Still easy if we think about our potential lifeguard’s tone of the voice itself? How about adding an additional factor then in the form of some audience? And what difference does it make if some members of this audience appear to be well-known to the rule breakers? In my analysis, I am making an

attempt to show, following Johnstone (2008: 128), that [c]hoices about what to say or write, facts about how conversations emerge or texts get written, and conventions as to how discourse is to be interpreted all are influenced by who is involved in producing and receiving it. How a text or conversation is shaped and what it is taken to mean has to do in part with who the audience is understood to be, who the text's producer or producers are, whether the person (or people) who write, sign, or speak the text are responsible for the text's meaning or just relaying it, what the relationships among text – or talk-producers and other participants are and what the participants would like them to be, who else is listening, watching, or reading or might be, and how discourse producers and audiences are related to these overhearers and eavesdroppers.

Discourse per se by referring to the activity of reading and interpreting a text makes a coherent (structured and meaningful) understanding of it. Texts, in turn, whether simple (our examples from the pool, for instance) or complex, are all representations of language produced with the main aim of referring to something for some purpose: communicative purpose. In fact, Biber and Conrad (in Schiffrin et al., 2008: 191) include communicative purpose within the three major communicative factors (two others being physical relation between the addressor and the addressee, and production circumstances), and conclude that “[w]ith respect to the last two of these factors, writing has a greater range of variability than speech. That is, while writing can be produced in circumstances similar to speech, it can also be produced in circumstances quite different from those possible in speech”.

But all that happens in line with context understood as a situation in which discourse occurs (as distinguished from co-text which is the actual text surrounding any given lexical item), and in which a piece of discourse is being produced, circulated and interpreted. Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2007: 4) in their “most satisfying definition of discourse” mention it (i.e. context) as the second equally important feature [a] piece of discourse is an instance of spoken or written language that has describable internal relationships of form and meaning (e.g. words, structures, cohesion) that relate coherently to an external communicative function or purpose and a given audience/interlocutor. Furthermore, the external function or purpose can only be properly determined if one takes into account the context and participants (i.e. all relevant situational, social, and cultural factors) in which the piece of discourse occurs.

Blommaert (2007: 134), to take a different viewpoint, sees it as “a singular point but a nexus of layered simultaneity” while Widdowson (2007: 20-21), on the other hand, as “not an external set of circumstances but a selection of them internally represented in the mind (...) not what is perceived in a particular situation, but what is conceived as relevant (...)” Linguists become aware of its importance at the beginning of the 1970s and the sorts of context to observe currently include: a) situational (what speakers know about what they can see around them), b) background knowledge (what they know about each other and the world), c) cultural (general knowledge that most people carry with them in their minds about different areas of life), d) interpersonal (specific and possibly private knowledge about the history of the speakers themselves), e) social (the choice of the politeness formulation depending on the social distance and the power relations between speakers), and, already mentioned, f) co-textual (known as a co-text or discourse context: what they know about what they have been saying – the context of the text itself) (Cutting, 2008). That said, Duranti and Goodwin (1992), for example, propose four types of context: 1) setting (physical and interactional), 2) behavioural environment (nonverbal and kinetic), 3) language (co-text and the reflexive use of language), and, 4) extrasituational (social, political, cultural, and the like), whereas Harmer (1995), to take a different view, speaks of: 1) the students' world (the physical surroundings and the students' lives), 2) the outside world (stories, situations and language examples – either simulated or real), 3) formulated information (timetables, notes, charts etc. – either simulated or real).

Incoming discourse can also be processed in two ways; videlicet we can distinguish between bottom-up (data-driven) and top-down (theory-driven) interpretation where contextual features and prior knowledge are used to process new information (prior knowledge, known as content schemata and sociocultural and discourse knowledge, known as formal schemata, get combined). The whole idea is perfectly grasped by Holec (1985: 23) who admits that “discourse does not refer solely to the text itself (verbal and non-verbal messages), but also to the context as well as psychologically and sociologically constrained situation, i.e. the circumstances in which the text is produced and interpreted (who addresses whom, with what communicative goal in mind)”. But context, I would like to emphasise after Blommaert (2007: 45), “is not something we can just ‘add’ to text – it is text, it defines its meanings and conditions of use”.

Context, then, ex definitione, can be explained by knowledge of the physical and social world and is a truly omnipresent phenomenon.”Context is potentially everything and contextualisation is potentially infinite”, Blommaert (2007: 40) writes. Both pragmatics – criticised though by Fairclough (1989) for its individualism and idealism – and discourse analysis (which will become the focus of attention of my analysis later) study the meaning of words in context as well as all the psychological or sociological factors influencing communication, too. “Pragmatics and discourse analysis have much in common: they both study context, text and function”, says Cutting (2008: 2) adding a remark that what discourse analysis calls coherence, pragmatics calls relevance.

Both differ, however, in their emphases on the structure of text or the importance given to the social principles of discourse. Indeed, discourse analysis is more centred around the well-formedness of texts while pragmatics around the process of text production and deals with the social, cultural and physical aspects of the situations that shape how people communicate with each other – in the view of Yule (1996), speaker meaning and contextual meaning rather than sentence meaning are the key characteristics of the area of pragmatics. As Cutting (2008: 3) further puts it: “[p]ragmatics takes a socio-cultural perspective on language usage, examining the way that the principles of social behaviour are expressed is determined by the social distance between speakers. It describes the unwritten maxims of conversation that speakers follow in order to cooperate and be socially acceptable with each other”. The traditional language analysis contrasts pragmatics – that is, as it has been said above, the interlocutor-related analysis of factors such as age and social relationship as well as communicative factors of one’s overall communicative competence such as politeness and appropriacy with syntax – the area of language analysis that describes relationships between linguistic forms and semantics – the area of language analysis that describes how meaning is encoded in the language. And, as for the notion of human communication itself, Coulthard (1985: 1) makes a point that it “must be described in terms of at least three levels – meaning, form and substance, or discourse, lexico-grammar and phonology”; other relevant features might also include the assumption of a similar general experience of the world, sociocultural or communicative conventions.

In fact, when people communicate with each other by either orienting to their own and others’ roles in the social world (professional or personal footing or framing), making use of whatever communicative channels (modes) become available or the engagement of schematic or systemic knowledge (including the application of interpersonal schemata, too – Widdowson, 2007), they try to key the language forms (both verbal and non-verbal) into a context. Such context, produced by some first-person party (a speaker or writer), it is assumed, be ideally shared for intended message to get across to some second-person party (the listener or reader) straightaway and, thus, facilitate achieving potential communicative goals and avoid, at times contentious, argumentation. Widdowson uses the term ideational constructs for such shared conceptions of reality; to put it in his (2007: 9-10) words [w]hen people communicate with each other, they draw on the semantic resources encoded in their language to key into a context they assume to be shared so as to enact a discourse, that is, to get their intended message across to some second person party. The linguistic trace of this process is the text. In the case of conversation, the text is jointly produced as the discourse proceeds by overt interaction, and it typically disappears once it has served its purpose. In the case of writing the text is unilaterally produced and remains as a permanent record.

Goals, in turn, are just one of the examples of categories of context, the final list of which, according to Van Dijk (2008: 356), also includes “the overall definition of the situation, setting (time, place), ongoing actions (including discourses and discourse genres), participants in various communicative, social, or institutional roles, as well as their mental representations: goals, knowledge, opinions, attitudes, and ideologies.”

The natural effort after meaning (term coined by Bartlett in the 1930s and stating that what is said or written will make sense in its very own context) certainly helps the above assumption. Equally important are the responses (or even confirmations alone – as is the case of invariant rule of discourse, Widdowson, 2007) that people get from their interlocutors, too as these not only display understandings of prior actions but can also themselves create contingencies for subsequent ones. The process of confronting from the right angle the linearization problem, where the speaker or writer has to choose a beginning point, influences the hearer’s or reader’s interpretation of what follows once the initial textual context has been established. Widdowson (2007: 43) acknowledges that “what is said at a particular point naturally makes reference to what has been said before and a context is created in the mind and signalled in the text in the process of production”. Such a set of discourse internal elements (people, events, facts, places etc.) introduced in the preceding co-text is named the domain of discourse.

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