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ON
DISCOURSE

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Introduction

We say most of what we say in strings of sentences, but not in random strings of sentences. There are processes at work in language that restrict later sentences in terms of earlier ones, and large scale structures within which individual sentences play their parts.

A linguist brings his special mode of reasoning to bear on language; he sees distinctiveness and contextual influence, constituency, and matching of complex relations, and tries to generalize about them. When he looks at total discourses rather than single sentences, he finds that he can apply the same mode of reasoning to increase his understanding there.

In *The Thread of Discourse*¹ I tried to show the sorts of things a linguist could find out by looking beyond sentences. That book came out of my interaction with several dozen people who were doing linguistic descriptions in the field and who thus had the field investigator's healthy skepticism about great ideas that don't fit facts. We worked together on quite a scattered sample of the world's languages in field seminars held between 1970 and 1973. Some of their studies have been published already; but rather than sending the linguist who wants to see their results on a tour of the library to track them down, I thought it appropriate to present a collection of papers under one cover.

While the papers presented here seem to me to back up the points I made in *The Thread of Discourse*, I should say that I believe another exploratory formulation of discourse theory may now also be possible. Take the abstract semantic structures which I represented there using derivations that looked like the branches of weeping willow trees because of their depth; it now appears reasonable that they might be representable much less abstractly in terms of the kind of interpretive theory that Babby and Jackendoff², among others, are developing. In that light, these papers illustrate the range of things that can and must be accounted for somehow.

The findings encountered in this early field work with discourse sorted themselves into six areas which correspond to the six parts of this book. First, come a group of studies on morphology. Certain morphological information is shown to tie in with the total structure of discourse, while other morphological categories add information about the specific lexical items to which they are attached, and others indicate syntactic constructions and agreement.

Second, come two groups of papers that deal with reference, focused mainly on pronominalization and related things. There seem to be two distinct strategies that languages use for establishing and maintaining reference. Some, like English, have a

¹Grimes, Mouton, 1975.

²Leonard H. Babby, "The Deep Structure of Adjectives and Participles in Russian", *Language* 49(2), 349-360 (1973). Ray S. Jackendoff, *Semantic Interpretation in Generative Grammar* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1972).

sequential policy by which the reference of one word is normally taken from the nearest candidate word before it. Others manage reference in terms of a **thematic** policy, in which one referent is distinguished from the rest when introduced, and a special set of terms refer to it no matter how many other things have been mentioned more recently.

Third, some languages have a clear-cut distinction among kinds of discourses, usually associated with structural signals for beginning, middle, and end, and also for smaller segments. These signals are present not only in heavily edited texts but also in ephemeral ones. They are frequently mismanaged by inept speakers and are used consistently by accomplished speakers.

Fourth, texts in some languages are shot through with particle words that mean nothing by themselves, but which act as pointers to discourse structure when they are considered in a larger context.

Fifth, a systematic repetition pattern called **linkage** is widespread. It is used in two ways, either to stitch together consecutive sentences within a paragraph-like block in some languages, or to show the boundary between blocks in others. There seem to be four types of linkage: repetitive, in which a linking clause repeats the main clause before it; periphrastic, in which the link is semantically more inclusive than its model; implicative, in which the link expresses a culturally conventional consequence of its model rather than repeating information; and conditional, in which an *if* clause repeating a statement is used in one language to introduce a new section of a procedure.

Sixth, a miscellany of other linguistic signals turn out to be simple to explain using discourse contexts and difficult to explain without them.

Rather than go into details about each of these six categories, I prefer to let the individual authors speak. They all worked closely with me over periods of two to three months; nearly all were able to verify their conclusions with native speakers of the languages they were studying before they put the manuscripts in final form.

We are all grateful to the National Science Foundation for research support in the form of Grant GS-3180, Cross Language Study of Discourse Structures, which made it possible to organize the field workshops that were held in Brazil, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines, Nigeria, Ivory Coast, Ghana, and Nepal. The governments of those countries and the field administrators of the Summer Institute of Linguistics are responsible for the ease with which the workshops were set up and carried out. Thomas Crowell and Peggy Attenberger helped me get them ready for publication.