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**Language in Context:
Essays for
Robert E. Longacre**

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The Function of Time Words in Guarayu

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Robert Longacre made a very powerful statement in *The Grammar of Discourse* when he wrote, "language is language only in context" (1983:xv). He immediately clarifies on the same page by adding:

For too long a time, linguistics has confined itself to the study of isolated sentences, either such sentences carefully selected from a corpus or, more often than not, artfully contrived so as to betray no need for further context.

Most of us, either through personal experience or through listening to the experience of others who have worked with languages, have heard of the MYSTERY PARTICLES or other linguistic phenomena which could never be properly analyzed on the word, clause, or even sentence level, but which gave up their secrets only when analyzed in light of the whole context, the discourse. Longacre gives the following list of such phenomena he has found in natural languages:

Among these problems have been deixis and the use of articles; pronominalization, and other anaphoric ways of referring to a participant; better understanding of tense, aspect, mode, and voice in verbs; use of optional temporal and spatial expressions; the function of extra-position, left dislocation, and other such features; subject selection, object selection, and other focus phenomena; the function and thrust of conjunctions and other sequence signals; and the function of mystery particles which occur in connected context in some languages, which the native speaker knows where to use and where not to use, but which defy translation. (1983:xv)

I would like to give an illustration of this from Guarayu,¹ a language of the Tupi-Guarani language family (Gregores and Suárez 1967:15) with which my wife and I worked in Bolivia.

Early in the analysis of the language I tried to elicit words relating to time—past, present, and future. I soon found that tense only had two realizations in the verb phrase, **REALIZED** (the unmarked form) and **UNREALIZED**. In a truer sense these indicate moods of the verb rather than tense. There was no way of distinguishing present from past, recent past, or distant past on the phrase level. I was able sometimes to distinguish the time frame by the use of a time word or phrase on the clause level. There were only a few clauses out of a large corpus, however, in which I was able to make this distinction. The vast majority of sentences gathered from texts were ambiguous in this respect.

Are they truly ambiguous? By looking only at the lexical meaning of the words within the sentence I could not determine whether the sentence was present tense or some form of the past tense. In normal everyday speech, however, this was perfectly clear to the hearers. As I analyzed the language from a discourse perspective (Newton 1978:198),² I found that a time word or phrase occurs in a narrative at the very beginning of the **SCENE** (setting) of a story and is sometimes repeated at the end of the scene. This is illustrated in (1) by the time word *araka?e* (distant past), from a story of *The Fox and the Jaguar*.

- (1) *Araka?e there was a fox-man. He befriended his uncle. His uncle was a jaguar araka?e.*

The time frame of the story is set by the speaker, in this example, in relation to the time in which the speaker gives his story. That is, the story happened in the distant past and outside of the experience of the story teller.

This analysis, however, does not give the total meaning or function of time words, nor does it indicate where they are to be used in a discourse.

¹There are approximately 5500 speakers of Guarayu in the central rain forests of Bolivia, South America, the majority of whom live in five main villages near the confluence of the White River and the San Miguel-San Julian River in the Department of the Beni. I worked in the village of Urubicha (63°W and 15°S), one of the five villages, between 1973 and 1985. The major part of the language analysis was completed by 1976.

²Dr. Ursula Wiesemann, of the Brazil Branch of the Summer Institute of Linguistics, held three workshops in Bolivia in 1973, 1975, and 1976. During this time, Dr. Wiesemann was a great help to me in analyzing different types of Guarayu texts from a discourse perspective. It was during these workshops that three of the functions of time words were discovered.

For instance, in the same story of *The fox and the jaguar*, once the scene is established, the jaguar initiates action as illustrated in (2).

- (2) *The jaguar said to the fox, "Let's go hunt for something far away to eat." So they went along the marsh in search of something. They killed a cow in the marsh. Then his uncle [the jaguar] said, "Return, go, and take this to your aunt so that she can eat," he said to him concerning the beef. He [the fox] returned bringing it. When it was dark he arrived at his aunt's, bringing it with him. Then his aunt said to him, "Where is your uncle staying?" "He is staying there in the marsh," he said. "He is keeping an eye on the meat," he said to his uncle's wife. "So my uncle sent this beef to you," he said. "My uncle said, 'Later on sleep with her,' " he said to his aunt araka?e.*

I could not at first figure out why the storyteller had used *araka?e* there in the middle of the episode! After further analyzing the text, I discovered that up to that point Jaguar had been taking the initiative. When Fox returned to the house with the meat for Jaguar's wife, he was simply doing what Jaguar proposed. It was at this point in the story that Fox took the initiative, for his uncle had said nothing about him sleeping with his wife!

This gave me two very different functions of the time word, and as I continued analyzing other texts I found that the general time word has at least four functions in Guarayu narrative:

- a. to indicate the time frame for the entire text,
- b. to optionally indicate the end of an episode,
- c. to indicate a significant change of the initiator of action, and
- d. to indicate a pivotal point in an episode, especially in the peak episode presented in a narrative.

Had I not looked at these stories and analyzed their constituent parts within their context—that is, from the perspective of the whole discourse—I would have missed an important part of the function of these time words in narrative texts, and I would not have been able to predict when to use them throughout the text.

This has ramifications for translating material from one language to another. If we are translating a narrative into Guarayu, and it is to be dynamic, then we need to know where to put time words so that they perform their proper functions and so that the translated narrative has the proper punch.

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