

## KINDS OF INFORMATION IN DISCOURSE

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To dig into discourse linguistically<sup>(1)</sup> it helps to start with some general categories. Useful ones come from the fact that in discourse we communicate different kinds of information at different times. Several studies by H.A. Gleason, Jr., and his students, for example, begin with the notion that there is a real difference in the ways that a speaker expresses the events and the non-events in a narrative.<sup>(2)</sup>

Texts that have nothing to do with events, such as explanatory speech, do not show up this difference as well as do event-oriented texts, and therefore are not as likely a starting point for analysis. Longacre, in fact, categorizes discourse into four general kinds: narratives, procedures, explanations, and exhortations.<sup>(3)</sup> These represent a more fundamental division into sequenced versus non-sequenced texts on the one hand, and texts that are built around projected time versus texts like narratives that are built around accomplished time on the other. It is the sequenced texts that yield the most initially.

It also helps to recognize that certain people in any society have a reputation for consistency in producing discourses that are good enough that other people want to listen to them. They can develop an aptitude for editing texts so that they are acceptable to the rest of the society. The analysis of discourse is easier, and at the same time more valuable, if it is based on edited texts.<sup>(4)</sup> In general, practiced discourses like folk tales are less likely to be told poorly than, say, personal narratives.

### EVENTS

Events in a time sequence are the backbone of narratives. The relationship between an event and the following event is often significant regardless of the amount of non-event information in between. Gleason, for example, mentions how Kâte of New Guinea registers whether two events have a gap between them. The size of the gap is relative to the kind of action that is going on; the basic distinction is one of gap versus no gap.

Another distinction is characteristic of Cashinawa of Peru as reported by Cromack (1968): whether an event is over and done with before the next starts. The semantic completion is different from asking if there is a gap or not, because one thing may be completed at the instant that another starts or it may have finished three years before.

Related to completion is a distinction between events that overlap and events that do not. Overlapping and completion are almost like two sides of the same coin, yet different languages have different emphases in how they handle each. For example, overlapping can mean that the first event continues on after the second one is complete: While it was raining we played chess. When we finished it was still raining. Another kind of overlapping is that of events that start at different times but finish at the same time: We both got to New Guinea at the same time, but I came from Brisbane and he came from New York. In partial overlap the extent of overlap is likely to be indeterminate. Chuave of New Guinea has this category for certain kinds of dependent verbs (Thurman ms).

The perfect tense in Greek implies that one event is finished before another begins, but the effects of the first carry over to the second. The two events are connected, not by time overlap, but through the results of the first.

So, for events in a sequence, one of the first things we look for is the range of relationships between adjacent events, and how each is indicated.

Sometimes what is physically speaking a single sequence of events is presented linguistically in such a way that the events are grouped together into complexes of events. An event that might be Number 23 in a complete narrative could also be the third event of the fifth group of events. Saramaccan (Grimes and Glock 1970) behaves in this way.

A conversation can be divided among speakers. The real activity is the talking, not what is said; but in each segment the two speakers are oriented differently toward the action, first with one talking and the other listening, then the opposite. This holds not only for talking but also for other kinds of activities. A series of actions in which the same orientation is maintained toward each action thus constitutes a subgrouping of its own (Becker 1965).

Another kind of segmentation is by plot division (Propp 1958). The notion of plot seems to be fairly fundamental in our mental makeup, even cross-culturally. The structure of a plot involves a complication part and a resolution part (Grimes ms). The complication begins with an optional introduction-violation sequence followed by an act of villainy or a bad situation, then goes on to the part where the victim is victimized. The resolution contains the conflict between the hero and the villain, and may end with a reward. Transitions from one segment of the plot structure to another segment are frequently made in a linguistically recognizable way (Austing ms).

Events are characteristically told in the sequence in which they happen. Some, however, are not in sequence: events cited to explain other events, flashbacks, simultaneous

events, antithetical counterparts, and those jumbles of rapidly paced events for which sequence is irrelevant (Briggs ms). Languages differ in the rigidity with which telling must match happening.

Flashbacks, as in the *Odyssey*, are different from the events outside the event line that are used for background or explanation. They are similar instead to foreshadowings, which give the content of events to come out of the sequence in which they come, as in the case of statements of purpose. All these are outside of the main sequence of events.

#### PARTICIPANTS

The participants in an action are distinct from the action itself. There may be a further distinction between participants and props : participants are usually animate and props inanimate, but that difference is not ironclad. Participants are usually agents or experiencers in a Fillmorean case scheme (Fillmore 1968, Frantz 1970) and props are patients and instruments, but again not uniquely so. Perhaps the clearest distinction is between participants as part of a participant orientation scheme (Wise and Lowe ms) and props that stand outside it.

In folk tales the linguist often does not know who did what, but his informant does know. The object of the reference game is to find out how he keeps track of who is who. There are different kinds of reference to keep track of. There is reference to individuals, or unitary reference. There is group reference, either to individual centred groups or to collective groups in which no individual stands out. Some groups are partitionable into smaller groups. There are undefinable groups like they in they say. There are also conventional groups, such that in some languages an unspecified they automatically refers to the entire society of which the informant is a part. A certain amount of referential shifting goes on; groups expand and contract. They also change in the scale with which the narrator views them without changing membership. As with a zoom camera lens, for instance, one scene may refer to a group as a whole while the next may change its scope to the interaction of sub-groups within it (Bradley ms). Shifts of viewpoint may change the organization of reference without changing scope.

A principal step, then, in keeping track of non-event information is to pin down the exact reference of everything in the text. This is usually done by asking the informant to supply any information that is not made explicit.

Reference is distinct from identification. Reference is the bookkeeping on who is doing what; identification has to do with what in the text indicates the reference. There may, for example, be zero identification for something whose reference is completely clear.

Means of identification include naming, description by means of descriptive nouns

or noun phrases, pronouns, identificational inflections like person-number indicators, and zero identification, or no linguistic forms at all to back up the reference. Description, unlike kinds of identification, can be expanded practically without limit. Emmon Bach (1968) and James McCawley (1970) suggest that this is because descriptive identification in a text has a unity of its own that is essentially independent of events and other kinds of information. (5)

The grammar of identificational things is usually different from the grammar of events. In identificational material equatives, for example, appear frequently, containing predicate nominals and statives or adjectives. It tends to be easy to distinguish identifications from things like events, which concentrate on transitive and intransitive forms.

Paul Postal has pointed out (reported by Gleason) that all identifications of a character have the same reference, but not necessarily the same meaning. For example, in She married the poor bachelor and made a good husband out of him, bachelor and husband refer to the same man but have different meanings. What we have here is a certain interlocking between the identificational information and the action. Just as the events in a story are time dependent, so the division of identificational information may be time dependent, usually in a much looser way.

Pronouns as identificational information are not as precise as names and descriptions but they frequently narrow the field down to where we can still maintain some distinctions in reference, e.g. English he, she, it can be adequate for distinguishing up to three non-plural participants of the right kind with nothing further needed. Lakoff points out a class of nouns that stand halfway between pronouns and what we might call descriptive nouns. These are the generic or inclusive nouns like person, man, guy (Lakoff ms, see also Langendoen 1970).

Some inflectional categories have a pronoun-like function through cross reference systems such as inflection for subject and object. Sometimes inflections, like pronouns, carry enough information distinctiveness to keep identifications untangled. Usually inflectional categories make fewer distinctions than pronominal categories, and pronominal categories make fewer distinctions than nominal categories. There is a kind of hierarchy of precision of identification so that speakers tend to use the lowest level of precision that is needed in order to keep things from getting mixed up.

In implicit reference (Wheatley ms) there simply is no indication of identification at all, and the hearer has to get his information about reference indirectly. This is also the case when inflectional or cross reference systems do not provide the distinctions that the subject matter requires.

## SETTING

When events happen they happen somewhere in time and space. Frequently the spans in a text within which several actions take place – spans that cover a particular place, a single trajectory of motion (Grimes and Glock 1970), a certain time – constitute significant segments of the texts. In a number of languages this fixing of the setting is the basis for paragraphing. There is one tricky point in the definition of setting: for certain actions (like hit in English) the location or sphere of the action is part of the definition of the action. As a rule of thumb, true settings can almost always be pulled out of a sentence and made into a separate sentence without destroying meaning. There are actions, though, for which location is really part of the meaning of the action itself: climbing always takes place on a particular surface, so that location and direction are part of the meaning of climb. The location that is inseparable from the action is sometimes called an inner locative, opposed to an outer locative, which is a separable setting.

Settings in space are handled in all kinds of ways. In English we can describe the setting and then refer to it. Maxakali of eastern Brazil (Harold Popovich, personal communication; see also Gudschinsky, Popovich, and Popovich, 1970) begins every paragraph with a precise characterization of the setting of that paragraph; but a number of directional particles refer to that setting. One set of directionals refers to the defined setting: toward it, away from it, and so forth. The speaker also has the possibility of naming other places distinct from the setting and pinning directions to them with a second set. The third set of directionals handles motion between defined locations and the main setting.

Oksapmin of New Guinea (Lawrence ms) defines a primary setting as the area around the person from whose viewpoint the event is told. There are two sets of locatives, each with proximal and distal forms; the first defines places and movements within (proximal) or outside (distal) the primary setting, and the other acts analogously for secondary settings, which are defined by means of a third set of locatives that describes motion from the last setting named to a new point of reference.

Settings can be established conventionally, like once upon a time. Contextually defined settings are fairly common, where a new setting is defined relatively as the end point of a motion away from the last setting, as in Oksapmin.

Time settings are different from space settings in that time moves. Every new event takes narrative time forward to some degree, on a scale that is not fixed or predictable ahead of time. Time may be defined in relation to other events, as in St. Luke's narrative of the birth of Christ, which is set at the time of a Roman census. Bororo of Brazil (Crowell ms)

uses an event that is not really part of the event sequence to define a time. Here too settings may be conventional (the olden days, in the dream time) or contextual (after an hour or so). Biological time is also possible : when he was a child.

The grammar that is used in establishing settings is likely to be somewhat different from that used for describing events and identifying participants. Locative constructions are common for both space and time ; in fact, the point where space leaves off and time begins is not easy to determine because linguistically they tend to be handled in parallel fashion.

#### BACKGROUND

Still other non-events are neither settings nor identifications. Background information includes straightforward explanation. It is sensitive to the speaker's estimate of what the hearer thinks; he explains only that for which he thinks explanation is necessary. Since this kind of explaining is based on abstract principles, the speaker is likely to think very cautiously about whether the hearer accepts those principles before he starts explaining things from them. This reflects possibly more than anything else in language how the speaker sizes up the hearer in forming his speech. The detail, the magnitude, and the logical basis of an explanation differs according to who he is talking to. This is one reason why folk tales are so frequently difficult to understand ; they are traditionally told to people who already have all the background.

Events that stand outside the main stream of events also give background information. These have their own structure and tell about something that happened before that explains what is going on in the main stream of events (Grimes and Glock 1970). There may be characters in the background that have nothing to do with those in the main sequence of events. Some languages distinguish these displaced event sequences from the main sequence of events by special tense forms ; this is largely what we use the English past perfect for.

Another kind of displaced event sequence looks forward to intended events rather than backward, and so stands within Longacre's framework of projected time vs. accomplished time. Foreshadowed events are mentioned as the reason for actions. Again, they can have their own structure, their own characters, and they may be marked grammatically for displacement as with the subjunctive in many Indo-European languages.

The part of a text that is central does not, of course, have to be the events; they are the backbone of narratives and procedures, but not of expositions or exhortations. What is here called background from the point of view of an analysis that starts with narratives is the core of other kinds of text.

Evaluations may be a kind of background information, or they might be considered a separate kind of information. There are evaluations by the speaker, which may be stated

as such or may be subtly implied by his lexical choices : one man's tyranny is another man's order. Other evaluations are imputed to persons in the story or are made, as in the speeches of the classical Greek chorus, by the society as a whole.

Evaluations bring the speaker and the hearer closer together because they operate not just on the basis of the content of what is being said, but on the basis of feelings. When they come at the end of a story they may be used for a teaching purpose : the moral of the story. They may also come in as general background – how so and so feels about something.

### COLLATERAL

Collateral information tells what might have happened but did not, or what might happen later. It always presents a range of possibilities that might happen, so that what actually does happen (an event) stands out by contrast. Sometimes collateral information gives all the semantic content of what actually does take place before it happens. When the event finally occurs it may be mentioned with a minimum of semantic content: and so they did. Characteristically the negatives, futures, and questions in a text are more likely than anything else to be collateral. Negatives tell what didn't or won't happen ; questions present something without committing the speaker as to whether those things will happen ; predictions present a possibility that may or may not be realized. There are various degrees of firmness of prediction, from complete prediction to probability to possibility to unlikely prediction to impossibility.

Quotations, generally speaking, are not themselves events, although a few imply events. Quotations frequently give predictions, conjectures, and all other kinds of collateral information. They may also contain background explanation. They are most likely to give collateral information, less likely to give background, and only under restricted circumstances do they report an event (except for texts that consist of straight dialogue, in which the implication is that whatever is mentioned in the quotation actually happens). Quotations themselves can embody other things – negation, questions, predictions – since these may be part of what someone says instead of part of the narration. Evaluation, like background, can take the form of quotation.

Most questions tell more than they ask. This interplay of the presupposition and the assertion of a request for information (Langendoen 1970) gives us the possibility of the loaded question, like When did you stop beating your wife?

The rhetorical question exists mainly to give a chance to assert the presuppositions behind it. Languages vary as to how rhetorical questions are handled. In Mundurucu of Brazil (Sheffler ms) there are only certain points in texts where rhetorical questions are appropriate. Rhetorical questions require an explicit answer immediately by the speaker

in languages like Huichol. In any case, the question technique is likely to be a device for giving collateral information about what might happen in the future by asserting as part of the question a hidden prediction of what is going to happen. It is another way of filling in semantic content before the action really happens.

In going through events, identifications, settings, backgrounds, and collateral, certain grammatical phenomena tend to be limited to certain kinds of information : transitives and true intransitives for events; statives and equatives for identificational information; locatives for settings; purpose and result and implications for background; quotations, questions, negations, and predictions for collateral information. So there is a sense in which the phenomena which we tend to categorize on other grounds also fit into language from a second perspective.

### PERFORMATIVE

There is one last category: performatives (Austin 1962). Austin's thesis is that there are certain things in our vocabulary of which the uttering is also the doing : I dare you, I pronounce you man and wife, I order you.

One requirement of a performative utterance is that it refer to an immediate situation; another is that the person who utters it be qualified to make it ; another that the person addressed also be qualified to receive it. Under those circumstances the utterance is a valid action. A good test frame for paraphrasing performatives is whether hereby can be inserted in the sentence : I hereby pronounce you man and wife.

Imperatives and interrogatives fit all the requirements of a performative if we take them as shorthand expressions for the fuller form. Any imperative or interrogative we can paraphrase into a performative : I hereby order you, I hereby request you to tell me... The shorthand expression has a grammatical form that can be mistaken for nothing else.

We can also take declaratives from a performative developed from inform : fish like mosquitoes = I hereby inform you that fish like mosquitoes. Thus the three major classes of sentences are shorthand forms of full performatives. For other performatives there are longhand forms but no corresponding shorthand forms analogous to imperative, interrogative, and declarative (Ross ms).

All this relates to an observation that Pike and Lowe have made (1969) that 'the "I-you" invariant role relationship underlies all other roles in conversation, and this at least must always be assumed.' Both are expressed in a model of semantic structure by means of the implied performative.

Not only the speaker and the hearer as referents are implied in a performative, but also where the speaker is, where the hearer is, and the time at which they are talking. This



is the basis of distinctions like those of demonstratives, which can all be brought back to this definition in terms of the performative. (Fillmore 1966)

The performative also determines the choice of person categories in pronouns. In indirect discourse the assignment of persons parallels that of the performative. This is not so in direct discourse; there person assignment comes from the performative by means of an adjusting process expressed in Lowe's Theorem (Lowe 1969). Person assignment in non-quotations is taken directly from the most immediately dominating performative.

Labov and Waletzky mention how the introduction to a discourse frequently states an explicit separation between the time of talking and the time of happening, while the coda brings the two back together again. The relation between the act of telling and the contents of a discourse thus constitutes a sixth and final kind of information that is involved in our understanding of a text.

#### FOOTNOTES

(1) Not all linguists agree that discourse can be approached linguistically. Nevertheless, preliminary results of applying linguistic notions to discourse studies are encouraging enough that ruling them out a priori now seems overly conservative. The research on which this paper is based includes field workshops held in cooperation with the Summer Institute of Linguistics in Brazil, New Guinea, and the Philippines in which 30 languages were represented. The manuscripts cited from these workshops are in the process of being published. The project was partially supported by the National Science Foundation. A preliminary version of this paper was presented to the Linguistic Society of Papua and New Guinea on February 24, 1971.

(2) Gleason 1968, Taber 1966, Cromack 1968, Stennes 1969.

(3) Longacre (1968) discusses hierarchical aspects of discourse extensively.

(4) The American tradition that anything the informant says is automatically right, while it weakened the hold of prescriptive grammar on linguistics in its day, is not helpful here, because poorly formed discourses are common in speech even though poorly formed words and phrases are not. I am indebted to Larry Jordan for observations on editing.

(5) The view of Bach and McCawley stands in contrast with that of Noam Chomsky (1965) and George Lakoff (ms), who view pronominalization as deletion of noun phrases at specifiable points rather than insertion of identificational information. Langendoen (1970) adds to the Bach-McCawley perspective, though not in a way that concerns us here.

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