ON DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

There is no such thing as discourse analysis. Or is there?
These questions are a matter of concern to the problem of discourse which is one of the most important topics of pragmalinguistic studies at present (here pragmatics meets semantics).

It is widely known that for a long time the study of meaning has been concerned with single sentences. The meaning of a sentence was equated with its truth—conditions; we know what a sentence means when we know under which conditions it is true. However, they tend to be sandwiched in between other sentences, thus forming a speech or a piece of writing—discourse. Discourse is an extremely fertile field of research and presents undoubted scholarly interest.

The aim of this paper is to bring together and analyze all different approaches on discourse analysis and to contribute to the ongoing debate concerning the status of cognitive analysis as a type of discourse analysis (DA).

In the seventies the question arose how we can determine discourse. There are two types of definitions traditionally given for the term discourse. Formal definitions typically characterize discourse as a unit of coherent language consisting of more than one sentence.

Functional definitions characterize discourse as a language in use (Schiffrin; 1994).1

Taken alone both of these definitions are deficient. A piece of discourse in context can consist of as little as one or two words as in “Stop” or “No smoking”. Alternatively, a piece of discourse can consist of hundreds of thousands of words as in the case of very long novel. Usually, a piece of discourse falls somewhere between these two extremes. The notion of “sentence” is not always relevant—especially when we consider spoken discourse. To our mind the most satisfying definition of discourse is one that combines those two perspectives: 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, etc.) that function 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 the relevant situational social and cultural factors) in which the piece of discourse appears.

Dealing with discourse analysis, we’d like to emphasize that this linguistic phenomenon started to attract attention from a variety of disciplines in the late 1960-s and through the 1970-s. At least two terms came to be used in parallel fashion: text linguistics, which focused on written texts from a variety of fields and genres and can often be related to particular school of linguistic analysis such as formal linguistics (e.g. Van Dijk’s linguistics)\(^2\) or systemic linguistics (e.g. Bhatia’s genre analysis)\(^3\), and discourse analysis, which entailed a more cognitive and social perspective on language use and communication exchanges and which included spoken as well as written discourse.

In the last case discourse analysis is defined as the analysis of language “beyond the sentence” (Deborah Tannen). This contrasts with the type of analysis more typical of modern linguistics; which are chiefly concerned with the study of grammar; the study of smaller bits of language, such as sounds (phonetics, phonology), meaning and the order of words in sentence.

More general discourse analysis investigates everyday conversation, written discourse of all types: narrative and other kinds of written or spoken texts.

Perhaps the best method would be to synthesize these two into a single, formalized approach. To our minds, discourse analysis can be characterized as a research method, as a way of approaching and thinking about a problem of discourse – interpretation of a problem. In this sense, discourse analysis is neither a qualitative nor a quantitative research method, but a manner of questioning the basic assumption of quantitative and qualitative research method. Discourse analysis doesn’t provide absolute answer to a specific problem, but enables us to understand the conditions behind a specific ‘problem’ and makes us realize its assumptions. It provides the scholar with a tool for studying communication within “socio – cultural contexts” (Van Dijk). In short, discourse analysis aims to provide accounts of the production, internal structure and overall organization (Brett Dellinger, Critical Discourse Analysis).
Another important aspect of discourse analysis is that of application that applied discourse analysis. Marianne Celce – Murcia frames four areas of discourse analysis: cohesion, coherence, information structure, turn-taking in conversation.

The use of various cohesive ties to link together all the propositions in a text results in cohesion of that text. Coherence contributes to the unit of a piece of discourse such that the individual sentences or utterances hang together. Information structure is the presentation of new information “old” information versus “new” one. The conversational turn-taking system answers the following questions: who speaks when and how long, who can interrupt, how topics get changed, etc. (Marianne Celce- Murcia, p9).

We’d rearrange the list in hierarchical order so as to reflect our own approach to this matter: information, structure, coherence, cohesion, conversational turn-taking.

A major concern of the area of discourse analysis referred to discourse as informative structure is the presentation of new information (rhyme). The text whether written or oral is a multidimensional structure. The basics of a text consists of syntax and lexicon, its grammar and semantics. However, the understanding of grammar and lexicon does not constitute the understanding of text. Coherence and the world view that author brings to the text are essential.

To the above-mentioned set of fields we find exclusively necessary to add also situations of social relevance. In most interactions the user of the language brings with her/him different disposition toward language which is closely related to social processes.

In addition to language structure ideology has a role to play in discourse analysis. Consequently, language can never appear by itself—it always appears as the representative of a system of language terms, which themselves realize discursive and ideological system.

Thus, we encourage the use of “multiple methods” in language research. As we see, discourse analysis since many years emphasizes the relevance of the study of context for our understanding of many aspects of discourse. Relevant in such context are the social domain (education, politics), the global act partially accomplished by the text or talk (legislation, teaching), the participants and their various communicative, social and professional roles, the
relations between participants (such as that of power), the setting (time, location) and maybe some other social or interactional properties of communicative event.

Part of the context, are also some of the cognitive properties of participants, such as their aims, knowledge and opinions. Without taking into account all this, we cannot understand why people are speaking or writing at all, what they say or write to the knowledge or other beliefs of the recipients. It seems to us that among many branches of discourse analysis (syntactic, semantic, a pragmatic analysis, stylistics, etc.) cognitive analysis is not a standard way of looking at text or talk. It doesn’t deal with abstract categories, but with the actual mental representations and processes of language users.

Indeed, there are structures of discourse that are rather generally accepted as being properties of discourse but which in fact are usually defined in cognitive terms, such as topic or theme, coherence, presupposition and so on (Van Dijk). Thus, a topic or macroproposition is not necessarily expressed in a text (although it might, for instance, be expressed in a Headline or Conclusion), but something assigned to discourse by language users in process of understanding or production. Similarly a presupposition can only be defined in terms of knowledge that is assumed to be shared with the recipients and finally, all discourse meanings and discourse processing are based on knowledge, but knowledge is not a linguistic but a cognitive category.

Thus, modern discourse semantics is both linguistic as well as cognitive.

We began cognitive analysis by global meaning structures and then pay attention to more local meanings of discourse and sentences. The elements of cognitive analysis are as follows: topics, implications, presuppositions, local coherence, lexical meanings (Van Dijk).

Topics are formally defined as macropropositions of a text. An empirically more adequate definition of topics is given in terms of the global meaning assigned to or inferred from fragments of discourse by language users. This global meaning is not only based on word or sentence meanings of discourse, but also needs vast amount of knowledge that is not provided by the text, but by the knowledge representations of the language users.

Implications are traditionally defined as propositions inferred from the meanings of actually expressed words, phrases, clauses or sentences of discourse. Thus, we say “two states are at war”, this usually implies, that “they fight and use arms
and armies to do so”. This is not a logical implication but rather propositions derived from our socially shared knowledge about wars.

Presuppositions are a specific type of implications. Thus, whereas the proposition that “John is dead” generally implies that “John is no longer among the living”, that set of such a proposition would include such propositions as “John died”, “John probably died of an illness, accident, etc.” (Van Dijk).

Local coherence: discourse is coherent not only when it is globally coherent (that a topic), but also when its respective sentences (propositions) are locally sequentially coherent. Such coherence was originally often accounted for in terms of meaning relations between subsequent propositions.

In the same way as propositions may have implications and presuppositions, also word meanings may have “specific implications”, often called “connotations”. Thus, we may describe the same group as “terrorists” or “freedom fighters”. In this case, the first word has rather negative connotations, whereas the second is rather negative.

We see, that a cognitive analysis generally applies to structures as following:

- Defining an overall meanings (topics)
- Examine relevant implied meanings of word, sentences
- What is being presupposed?
- How does the context cohere?

In connection with discourse analysis we’d like also to dwell upon objections to the background of a theory of discourse. For traditional linguists such an approach may be too “mentalistic” – either because it is not about text structure but about mental structure, because ignores the important interactional and social aspects of discourse. Nothing is less true. First of all, a meaning of a text is not “in” the text, but assigned to a text by language users and as such represented in their minds.

A cognitive analysis does not at all exclude a further-social analysis. Indeed, many aspects of cognitive representations are themselves social – such as the socially shared knowledge and other beliefs. A social interaction is unthinkable without a cognitive component, in the same way as a cognitive account is incomplete without a social component that explains structures of context.

Thus discourse analysis is an interdisciplinary approach to language study. It’s a powerful means of understanding how thought functions. In cognitive analysis, interpretation is not static nor an abstract procedure as in linguistic semantics,
but a dynamic ongoing process of assigning meaning and functions to units of discourse.

Notes

1. D. Schiffrin presents interactional sociolinguistic approaches to language study and speech act.

Speech act theory, Schiffrin writes, "focuses upon knowledge of underlying conditions for production and interpretation of act through words. Interactional sociolinguistics focuses on how people from different culture may share grammatical knowledge of language, but differently contextualize what is said such that very different messages are produced" (Approaches to discourse, 1994).

Interactional sociolinguistics aims to reveal the social meaning of a conduct in a particular content of the interaction between self and other associated with the conduct.

2. Specifically Van Dijk states that the focus on "textual or conversational structures derives its framework from the cognitive, social, historical, cultural or political contexts" (Tuen Van Dijk, The relationship between ideology, society, cognition and discourse analysis).

Van Dijk’s approach is not limited to the study of the surface structures and meanings of (isolated, abstract) sentences. Ideology plays a "crucial role" in Van Dijk’s analytical method. To Van Dijk, "ideologies are viewed as "interpretation frameworks" which organize studies of attitudes about other elements of modern society.

Van Dijk offers a "scheme" of relations between ideology, society, cognition and discourse.

3. The author emphasizes the communicative purpose of the text as the most important feature related to genre. It is communicative purpose that shapes the genre and gives it internal structure.

Register reflects degree of formality of the particular text by using a characteristic set of lexical and grammatical features that are compatible with the particular register. A lower register is represented by the use of more colloquial and everyday - type vocabulary and fewer complex grammatical forms while a higher register - the use of the lexical items that are professional or academic in
nature along with denser grammatical structures, usually in a more literate spoken or written text.

4. European researchers often use the terms theme and rhyme while in north America – topic and comment.

5. The comprehension of meaning lies not in the text itself, but in the complex interaction between the author’s intent and his ability to encode that in text, and the receptor’s intent and his ability not only to decode the author’s intent but to mesh his own intent with the author’s (G. Kress, Critical Discourse Analysis).

6. For more than 25 years, cognitive psychology has been actively engaged in the study of the processes of discourse production and comprehension. Emerging from the psycholinguistic study of sentence processing in the 1960s and 1970s, this approach emphasized that mental processes of understanding should not be limited to isolated sentences. People produce and understand whole discourses, and even the processing of words, clauses and sentences needs to be studied as integral part of the processes involved in the production or comprehension of discourse.

**LITERATURE**

7. Teun A. Van Dijk, *Cognitive Discourse Analysis*, University of Amsterdam, Universitat Pompeu Fabra, Barcelona, 2000