# DISCOURSE ANALYSIS: CONTEXTUALISM AND REDUCTIONISM

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## ABSTRACT

For the past twenty to thirty years, a good part of the domain of linguistics has been occupied by what has been called *discourse analysis*. Whereas syntax and semantics are concerned by the sentence and the units from which the sentence is built, discourse analysis claims that interpretation cannot accounted for at the level of the sentence and that a bigger unit, such as discourse should be used to account for language interpretation. We want to show here that discourse is not, in any sense, a well defined object and that, though it is certainly necessary to analyze how a given sequence of sentences is processed and understood, the notion of *discourse*, and related notions such as *coherence* does not have much to say about it. We rely on epistemological considerations about the necessity of a moderate reductionism and sketch on account of linguistic interpretation which accounts for contextual factors in linguistic interpretation through the notion of utterance (vs. sentence) and a development of Sperber & Wilson's Relevance Theory.

## Keywords

Discourse analysis; Contextualism; Reductionism; Coherence; Relevance.

## INTRODUCTION

Discourse analysis is built on a premise:

(1)  Syntax and semantics are not sufficient to account for linguistic interpretation because their domain is to the sentence.

Discourse analysts draw a conclusion from that premise:

(2)  To  account for linguistic interpretation, it is necessary to have a unit larger than the sentence.

Discourse analysis has an obvious candidate for the status of larger unit: *discourse* (or *text* for the written language approaches). Yet it does not seem that discourse is in any way a well-defined entity and a unit which may be circumscribed through linguistic means. We will come back to that question in the next section.

Given  that there is no precise definition of discourse, it is hard to evaluate the validity of an approach which substitutes discourse to sentence as a unit of scientific investigation, but it should be remarked that discourse, if it is a linguistic unit (as is claimed by most discourse analysts), cannot easily account for indexicals, to name only one thing.

What is more, it may be doubted whether the lack of a precise or acceptable definition of discourse is a matter of chance: in fact, we think that a definition of discourse which would justify the investigation of discourse as a scientific endeavour is impossible.

## 1.THE DIFFICULTIES OF DEFINING DISCOURSE

As a good number of linguistic and cognitive terms, discourse also belongs to everyday language, where it is ambiguous between the interpretation where it means a sequence of utterances produced by a single individual in a special circumstance, an understanding where it means a sequence of utterances which limits are determined by the circumstances, a third understanding where it means the linguistic expression of a thought, and a last understanding where it means a mere chatting. None of these common sense interpretations can be used to circumscribe a scientific entity. What is more, it does not seem that discourse analysts have succeeded in circumscribing the notion of discourse in a satisfactory way, their description, based on an analogy with the relation between sentence and grammaticality, defining discourse on the basis of coherence. In other words, a discourse is defined as a *coherent* sequence of utterances in the same way as a sentence is defined as a *grammatical* sequence of words. Yet, the analogy with syntax not straightforward as the sentence can be defined through grammaticality because grammaticality is described through the rules of syntax, whereas coherence does not seem to obey a finite number of precise rules. Indeed, coherence, a quality which is attributed to discourse and should be enough to define it, does not connect with determined linguistic markers such as cohesion[1]: it is easy to show that cohesion markers are independent of the intuitive judgment of coherence or non-coherence bearing on a given sequence of utterances. There are incoherent sequences of utterances with or without cohesion markers and coherent sequences of utterances with or without cohesion markers (Blass 1985, Moeschler 1989, Reboul & Moeschler 1995, among others). For instance, the discourse in (3) cannot be said to be coherent, and the adjunction of cohesion markers (indicated in bold for connectives, italics for discourse anaphora and △ for ellipsis) does not solve the problem of coherence in (4):

(3)  John bought a cow. It is red-haired like a squirrel. It lives in the forest and hibernates during winter. It is very cold in this part of the world.

(4)  John bought a cow. **Indeed** *it* is red-haired like a squirrel. *It* lives in

the forest and △ hibernates during winter. **But** *It* is very cold in this

part of the world.

In the same way, the lack of cohesion markers in (5) does not impede an interpretation (7), given the right context, such as (6):

(5)  We'll have guests tonight. Calderon was a great writer.

(6)  a. Today is the anniversary of Calderon's birth.

b. The speaker is a fan of Calderon.

(7)  The speaker is organizing a diner in homage to Calderon.

Thus the coherence judgment is independent of the presence or absence of cohesion markers.

It should be added, before coming back to the possibility of defining discourse, that the notion of coherence does not have the advantages expected: it does not help interpret indexicals (as it applies exclusively at the linguistic level); it does not yield an interpretation of discourse anaphora and, most notably, of definite descriptions (mainly because definite descriptions do not always refer back to an already mentioned object); it does not help either to interpret evolving reference anymore than it helps with tense or connectives. In other words, it seems that the notion of coherence is an

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[1]  . It has long been thought in discourse analysis that the so-called *cohesion markers* (i.e. connectives, discourse anaphora, ellipsis) were what made a sequence of sentences coherent.

intuitive and pre-theoretical notion and that, far from being of any help to analyze anything whatsoever, a judgment of coherence itself needs to be explained through other factors.

Let us come back to the definition of discourse: trying to define it through coherence does not seem highly efficient and recourse to linguistic markers yields circular or inadequate definitions. Thus, some discourse analysts (see Roulet & al. 1985) advanced the hypothesis that there are structures peculiar to discourse. Yet, it can be shown that one and the same discourse can receive two different structures or more, which leads to the thought that the structure is neither more nor less than the more or less formal representation of an interpretation: it is not an essential characteristic of a discourse, nor a help toward an interpretation (see Reboul & Moeschler 1985).

Discourse, despite the widespread use of the notion, still has to be defined in a precise way. Our ambition here is not to give a definition of discourse which would justify the use to which discourse analysis puts it. Rather, we think that one must say how discourse is interpreted and, with this objective in view, we define it as follows:

Def (1) A discourse is non-arbitrary sequence of utterances.

This definition cannot be used to identify a unit yielding an analysis, but rather sequences of sentences in need of an analysis.

## 2.REDUCTIONISM

As long as we accept that the interpretation of discourses (under the above definition) must be accounted for, it could be asked in which way our proposal is different from that of discourse analysts. The answer is simple: we do not think that discourse has the necessary characteristics to be used as a minimal unit for any analysis whatever. Rather, the analysis of a given discourse must use other units of which none is the discourse concerned. In other words, we adopt an explicitly reductionist approach on discourse.

On our view, an explicitly reductionist position is a position which accounts for phenomena from scientifically relevant categories. A category is *scientifically relevant* only if it cannot be reduced to its elements and to the relations between these elements, i.e. when it is emergent in a specific sense or when it does not have any element. We distinguish between *emergent 1* facts and *emergent 2* facts:

Def (2)  Definition of emergence

   A fact is emergent 1 iff

(i)       F is composed of elements a, b, c…

(ii)      F has some features which are not or not necessarily features of a,b, c…

(iii)     Some of the features of F can be deduced or computed from the

         features of a, b, c… on the basis of their arrangement or composition.

(iv)     Some other features of F are explained in terms of the casual

         interactions among a, b, c…: those are casually emergent features.

Def (3) Definition of emergent 2 A fact F′ is emergent 2 iff:

(i)       F′ is emergent 1.

(ii)      F′ has casual powers which cannot be explained by the casual interactions of a, b, c…

According to us, a category is scientifically relevant iff it is emergent 2 and we think that discourse is not an emergent 2 category, but an emergent 1 category.To justify this position, we must do two things: on the one hand, we must show that discourse does not have casual properties which cannot be explained through the casual interactions between its elements; on the other hand, we must say what are the elements of discourse. We will begin by the second task.

If we come back to linguistics, each of the traditional domains in linguistics corresponds to a scientifically emergent category, either because this category is emergent 2, or because it cannot be divided into smaller units. Thus, phonology has as its category the phoneme and the relations between phonemes and, at least from a linguistic point of view, there are no smaller units of which the phoneme would be composed. Syntax and semantics have as a scientifically relevant category the morpheme which is a typical example of emergent 2 fact: indeed, if, from a phonological perspective, the morpheme is composed of phonemes, neither the syntactic category it belongs to nor its meaning can be reduced to its phonemes or to the relations between these phonemes. On the reverse, the sentence is an emergent 1 fact, which can be reduced to the elements which compose it (the morphemes) and to the relations between these elements. If we come back to the postulate of discourse analysis (1), it might be tempting to conclude that discourse is an emergent 2 fact and thus a scientifically relevant category:

(1)    Syntax and semantics are not sufficient to account for linguistic interpretation

       because of their domain, which is the sentence.


In a reductionist perspective, this postulate could be reformulated in the following way:

(1′)  a. Discourse cannot be reduced to sentences which compose it and to the

relations between these sentences because the sentence is not a scientifically

relevant category.

b. Discourse cannot be reduced to morphemes because the morphemes which

compose it and the relations between them are not sufficient to account for the

casual properties of discourse.

Thus it would seem that discourse is an emergent 2 fact and, in this sense, constitutes a scientifically relevant category.

Still, if discourse cannot be reduced to sentences or morphemes, this does not mean that it cannot be reduced to something else and, in this case, we rather naturally think of utterances. If the proposal to reduce discourse to utterance is to be meaningful, we must: a) define utterance; b) show that utterance is a scientifically relevant category; c) show that discourse can be reduced to utterances which compose it and to the relations between these utterances.

In a highly unoriginal way, we adopt the following definition of utterance:

Def (4) Definition of utterance

An utterance is the result of the specific production of a sentence.

We must still show that utterance does not reduce to sentence. To do this, it is enough to show that utterance interpretation requires non linguistic information. This is of course the case for indexicals and it is sufficient to show that utterance is more than sentence and does obviously not reduce to morphemes. Thus, the interpretation of (8):

(8)  I am here now.

As the occurrence of a sentence, will change depending on the speaker, time and place of production. All occurrences of sentence (8) will yield different interpretations for the deictics.

What is more, utterance interpretation cannot reduce only to the linguistic information transmitted by the corresponding sentence, as is shown by the problem of discourse anaphora. It does not seem doubtful that utterance is both distinct from the sentence (i.e. does not reduce to it) and constitutes a scientifically relevant category. Thus, discourse might well not be a scientifically relevant category, despite (1′), in as much as it could be reduced to the utterances which make it. We will show that this is right below.

## 3. REDUCTIONISM AND CONTEXTUALISM

Showing that discourse is not a scientifically relevant category and that it can be reduced to utterances composing it and to the relations between utterances is a reductionist goal, which success goes paradoxically through contextualist considerations. Recanati (1994) describes the differences between contextualist and anti-contextualist approaches in the history of analytical philosophy and indicates, rightly, that the distinction between the one or the other of these approaches goes through the importance attributed to the distinction between formal language and natural language. If the sentences of a formal language have an interpretation fixed and independent of context, it is, to say the least, doubtful that it is the case for the sentences of a natural language which interpretation seems influenced by context. According to contextualism, this difference is very important, while anti-contextualists think that it can be resolved if the problem is seen from a certain level of abstraction. The thesis of the anti-contextualists is based on the following principle (Recanati, 1994, 1570:

(9)  For every statement which can be made using a context-sensitive sentence in a

given context, there is an eternal sentence[2] that can be used to make the same

statement in any context.

If anti-contextualists were right, it would have to be admitted that discourse can be reduced to morphemes and that there are no basic difference between sentence and utterance, i.e. that utterance interpretation is the same as the corresponding sentence interpretation. We have seen above that this is not the case and we will not discuss it any further. Recanati, in his paper shows that Grice's anti-contextualist argument is not acceptable because it relies on a *petition principii* by presupposing a principle, the Parallelism Principle, which is not acceptable for contextualists:

(10)  *Parallelism Principle*

If a (syntactically complete) sentence can be used in different contexts to say

different things (to express different propositions), then the explanation for this

contextual variation of content is that the sentence has different linguistic

meanings- is semantically ambiguous.

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[2] . An eternal sentence is a sentence which interpretation is context-independent.

Obviously the alliance between the principle of parallelism and the principle of modified Occam's razor (which prohibits the multiplication of linguistic meanings) forbids that the same sentence can be used in different contexts with different interpretations. Yet, it should be noticed that the principle of parallelism supposes that utterance interpretation, reduced on this view to sentence interpretation, is entirely codic, that is that linguistic interpretation strictly speaking (syntax and semantics) is enough to utterance interpretation, which is highly doubtful. As Recanati says, contextualist position does not commit one to attributing a basic ambiguity to sentences or morphemes: it is enough to postulate an under-determination in language and to consider that utterance interpretation is equivalent with sentence meaning. The sentence is thus not ambiguous, but under-determined. The proposition expressed does not depend exclusively, on this view, on linguistic meaning, but also depends on contextual elements. Not that this position, which Recanati names *Methodological Contextualism*, is exactly that which we have defended in the previous section: it is tantamount with considering that utterance is emergent 2 relative to sentence.

Hence the paradox evoked above can be solved: to defend a reductionist position regarding discourse, one must adopt a contextualist position regarding utterance. We will now develop this position and show how the utterance is interpreted and how utterance interpretation is sufficient to account for discourse.

## 4. CONTEXTUALISM AND UTTERANCE

Coming back to the anti-contextualist thesis in (9), note that, even if it were true, it has nothing to say about the function which the context does or does not play in utterance interpretation, mainly because it does not deal with utterance interpretation or even with sentence interpretation:

(9) For every statement which can be made using a context-sensitive sentence in a

given context, there is an eternal sentence that can be used to make the same statement in any context.

In this and the next section, we will deal not with the existence or non-existence of eternal sentences but with utterance interpretation and the respective weight of linguistic and contextual data in this interpretation.

Taking a contextualist stance does not imply denying that linguistic data (lexicon, syntax, etc.) have a role in utterance interpretation. It merely means saying that these data are not sufficient and that they must be completed by non-linguistic interpretation processes, which can be called *contextual.* Utterance belongs to the domain of pragmatics rather to that of linguistics, i.e. to the domain of language use, rather than to that of language *simpliciter*. We thus adopt a pragmatic perspective, the post-Gricean perspective which was developed by Sperber et Wilson in their book, *Relevance* (1995).

Relevance theory is a pragmatic theory of a new kind, in as much as it is both cognitive (it lies in Chomskyan paradigm where the study of language is a part of cognitive sciences), truth-conditional and inferential. According to Sperber and Wilson, faithful to Fodor's modular theory (1983), pragmatics is the last step in utterance interpretation. It is a non-specific process which belongs to the central system and uses an inference device to interpret the utterance. The inference device has as its premises the data accessed through the input system specialized in the processing of linguistic data the propositions in the context. These propositions come from different origins: the interpretation of preceding utterances, encyclopedic knowledge of the world, perception data coming from the physical environment where the communication occurs. They are selected on the basis of a principle, the *principle of relevance*, which says that every utterance carries the presumption of its own optimal relevance. Relevance is a function both of the cost of utterance processing (the less difficult to process the utterance, the more relevant it is) and of the effects produced by the utterance in a given context (the more effects produced by an utterance in a given context, the more relevant this utterance in this context). The effects concerned are of three kinds: changing the force with which a proposition is entertained; yielding new propositions or synthetic contextual implications, deduced from the utterance and the context; suppressing a proposition when a contradiction occurs. On this view, the propositions in the context have been chosen because they were the best able to yield an interpretation consistent with the principle of relevance. The principle of relevance also comes into play at the end of the interpretation process to stop it when an interpretation consistent with the principle relevance has been attained.

Note that, though they are contextualist, Sperber and Wilson are nonetheless of the Gricean family, especially in their view of what an utterance is: they insist on the importance of speaker's intentions in the communication process and distinguish the speaker's informative intention (making manifest or more manifest to the hearer a set of assumptions) and the speaker's communicative intention (making mutually manifest that the speaker has this informative intention). Communication is successful when the speaker's communicative intention has been satisfied: through his utterance, he or she made manifest to his hearer the set of assumptions which was the object of his or her informative intention. We will here adopt this theory of utterance interpretation. Thus, the reason why we say that utterances rather than sentences are emergent 2 is that utterance interpretation is a central system process, going through an inferential device relative to a context, whereas sentence interpretation is an input system process which goes through purely linguistic devices and is not relative to a context.

## 5. CONTEXTUALISM AND DISCOURSE

We still have to say how discourse is interpreted and to show that it is in fact reducible to the utterances of which it is made and to the relations between these utterances. It seems that discourse, like utterance, is interpreted via people's ability to mutually attribute to themselves and others beliefs, intentions, feelings, etc.: in other words, via what was called by Dennett (1987) the *intentional stance*. The intentional stance is both the ability and the tendency to attribute to others internal representations (beliefs, desires, intentions, etc.). It has the rather notable characteristic of being mandatory and to apply farther than other beings, to the simplest mechanical devices. As Dennett says:"[ there is an] unavoidability of the

intentional stance, with regard to oneself and one's fellow intelligent beings". This characteristic of the intentional stance partially explains the principle of relevance that is the fact that each utterance conveys a guarantee of its own optimal relevance. As Sperber and Wilson say, the principle of relevance is not a constraint which the speaker should try to satisfy or to which he might disobey: it is a general principle of interpretation which apply in all circumstances.

If the intentional stance is one of the origins of the principle of relevance, it is clear that it applies at the level of discourse as much as at the level of utterance and this is also true of the principle of relevance. This means that if utterance interpretation aims to recover the informative intention of the speaker at a local level, it seems plausible that there are one or more intentions behind a discourse and that discourse interpretation aims to recover these intentions[3]. We will distinguish *local intentions*, which have to do with utterance from *global intentions* which have to do with discourse. The problem, to justify that discourse can be reduced to utterances, is to show how global intentions can be recovered on the basis of local intentions (i.e. how discourse interpretation can be reduced to utterance interpretation.

How then can one go from local intentions to global intentions? It seems to us that a static analysis where local intentions accumulate to from a global intention which would be accessible only at the end of discourse and which would be equivalent with the set of local intentions would not be satisfying. We would rather propose a dynamic analysis of the interpretation process. According to us, in the same way as utterance interpretation is a dynamic process, discourse interpretation is also a dynamic process. Let us return to the intentional stance: it has as its object the intentions, etc. of other people. Its main interest is that it allows predicting the future behavior and intentions of other people. In a good number of cases, it allows to choose appropriate reactions or to anticipate the behavior of other people. In the case of linguistic communication, the same thing is true because the intentional stance is accompanied by the principle of relevance which reinforces its predictive power. At utterance level, this means that utterance interpretation also proceeds by anticipation. The hearer forms anticipatory hypotheses on what will be the end of the utterance based on its beginning, and thus reduces, when these hypotheses are right, the processing cost. That this process occurs can be seen each time an individual begins a sentence which his or her hearer ends for him or her. On our view, discourse interpretation implies, as utterance interpretation, that anticipatory hypotheses are built on the basis of the interpretation of successive utterances and of the inferences which the hearer can draw from them about the speaker's goal intentions.

The passage from local intentions to global intentions occurs here; as soon as the first utterance is produced by the speaker, the hearer builds a representation of the speaker's global intention 9he wants to talk of this or that subject, etc.). This global intention is then modified with each new utterance, with three possibilities which, not surprisingly, are the same as those which occurs in the context:

(i)     a local intention can contradict one element of the global intention, in which case

    this element will be erased;

(ii)     a local intention can change the force with which can element of the global

     intention is entertained, making it either more or less plausible;

(iii)     a local intention can, in conjunction with the elements in the global intention,

     inferentially produce one or more new elements in the global intention.

     The elements of the global intention have a propositional form and that, in one way or another, they are integrated to the context and correspond, in the context, to the information drawn from the interpretation of proceeding utterances or, rather, to some of them. This contextualist hypothesis on discourse interpretation and utterance interpretation allows a reductionist approach of discourse which reduces to utterances and to the relations between utterances which are established during the interpretation process. We would like now, as a conclusion, to say a few words about coherence.

## 6. DISCOURSE AND COHERENCE

 It seems extraordinarily difficult to define discourse and the most common endeavor to do so relies on the common sense notion of *coherence*. Yet it appears that coherence is not a more precise or more easily defined notion than is discourse and all the research trying to establish it on linguistic markers have clearly failed. Yet, just as there are discourses in the sense of definition Def 1, there are judgments of coherence and these judgments, no matter how intuitive they are, must be integrated to theory of discourse interpretation that is it must account for them. It seems that there are two possible strategies: either new element accounting for these coherence judgments must be added to the discourse theory outlined above, or elements already present in this theory can be used to account for these judgments, without adding anything to the theory. The first strategy would be a kind of justification for the idea that there is a notion of coherence at least partly independent from discourse, which might either be defined or taken as a primitive and which would itself allow the definition of discourse. The second strategy does not in any way resuscitate the hope of a definition of discourse via coherence as, in a way; it dissolves coherence in utterance interpretation, without making it an independent principle or reality. Rather obviously, we will adopt the second strategy.

How are judgments of coherence formed? Do they depend on the properties of the discourse to which they are applied, independently of the interpretation of this discourse? It seems clear to us that coherence is not an intrinsic property of discourse and that coherence judgments depend both on the way discourse interpretation preceded and on the richness

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[3] . This does not mean that the hearer always attains the "right" intention, i.e. misunderstandings or errors are always possible.

or poverty of the global intention which the hearer (who is the source of the coherence judgment) has drawn from it. Just as relevance depends both on the processing cost and on the richness of effects, coherence is attributed to a discourse depending both on the difficulty encountered when constructing a global interpretation for this discourse and on the richness of this global intention. On this view, coherence, just as relevance, is a relative notion rather than an absolute notion and can bear degrees. We propose the following principle:

(11)    *Judgment of coherence*

(a)      The more easy to construct the global intention of a given discourse is, the more

        coherent this discourse is.

(b)      The richer the global intention of a given discourse is, the more coherent this

        discourse is.

Yet, despite their apparent similarity, the notion of coherence and the notion relevance are radically different. The first only applies at the end of the interpretation process and is not part of it, while the second is the main principle governing interpretation. Thus coherence is a static notion in as much as it only occurs at the end of the process, while relevance is a dynamic notion which guides the interpretation process. Note that, according to discourse analysts, the reverse formula should be true: *Relevance is a static notion in as much as it comes at the end of the process while coherence is a dynamic notion guiding the interpretation process*. What is wrong with such a formula? Obviously, the lack of a definition for coherence: if it is coherence which guides discourse interpretation, then, given the lack of a definition, discourse analysis makes the interpretation process opaque, and sees it, more or less, as a black box. On the reverse, relevance has a definition and, thus, the process of utterance interpretation and of discourse interpretation can be described and coherence can be defined as the product of interpretation rather than its moving principle or as an intrinsic and mysterious property of discourse.

## Conclusion

Last, we would like to compare the two approaches, the one which we have criticized, discourse analysis, and the one which we defend, a theory of discourse interpretation which is both reductionist and contextualist in the theoretical framework of relevance theory. According to us, discourse analysts have never been able to give a satisfactory definition of discourse whether they tried to base such a definition on the notion of coherence or to define it via a structure which would be specific to it, in a teleological endeavor doomed to fail. What is more, discourse analysis fails to account for discourse interpretation, mainly because it bases this interpretation on the notion of coherence, failing to describe coherence and thus transforming the interpretation process into a mysterious process about which it seems difficult to say anything precise. On the reverse, we think that the unit which allows for the description of discourse interpretation is not discourse, but utterance and, in the perspective of relevance theory, we propose a contextualist theory of utterance interpretation and of discourse interpretation which offers an account of coherence. Under this definition, coherence is merely a result and is cut down to its role that is an epiphenomenon of the process of discourse interpretation.

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