EPISODES IN BUSINESS DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

LUMINIȚA COCĂRTĂ*

Abstract

Advanced students will be inclined to suppose that they know well enough how to read, but there is plenty of evidence to show that even advanced students often fail to "read" with adequate efficiency, especially with regard to comprehension.

The paper tries to demonstrate that making sense of a text is an act of interpretation that depends as much on what we as readers bring to a text, as what the author puts into it. And this is something we should make our students aware of.

Keywords: reading, markers, connective words, textual segments, signals, discourse analysis, interpretation

Introduction

When reading a text we obviously take into consideration markers of various kinds. The linguistic signals of semantic and discourse functions (e.g. in English the -ed on the verb is a marker of pastness) are concerned with the surface of the text. Cohesive markers, for example, create links across sentence boundaries and chain together items that are related (e.g. by referring to the same entity). But reading a text is far more complex than that: we have to interpret the ties and make sense of them.

Interpretation is actually seen as a set of steps (some authors prefer to call them procedures: De Beaugrade and Dressler) and therefore, this kind of approach emphasizes the role of the reader in actively building the world of the text, based on his/her experience of the world and how states and events are characteristically manifested in it.

The reader has to activate such knowledge, make inferences and constantly assess his/her interpretation in the light of the situation and the aims and goals of the text as the reader perceives them. He also needs to detect, for example, what kind of relationship exists among the sentences e.g. whether they illustrate a general statement, whether they follow a line of narrative or demonstration, whether they are discussing the pros and cons of a topic, whether they set out to prove a particular conclusion. The reader has to pay

* Lector universitar doctor la Universitatea „Alexandru Ioan Cuza” Iași, Facultatea de Economie și Administrarea Afacerilor
nevertheless, or, whereas, provided that, unless and so on, but he should also remember that many connective features do not appear at the beginning of sentences or clauses. Furthermore, he must be aware that the relationship between sentences in a paragraph is not always expressed in an actual word, but is implied in the statements made and their juxtaposition with each other.

**Discourse analysis**

Let us take two segments of texts used in our Specialised Translation (especially from economic texts) seminar work, and see how they may be interpreted.

A segment may sometimes be a clause, sometimes a sentence, sometimes a whole paragraph. Here are two sentences from a report on an exhibition:

*The stress is on documentary and rightly so. Arty photographs are a bore.* (The Guardian, 27 October 1988; 24)

What would make sense is that the relationship between the second sentence and the first is that the second provides a reason for the first. The two segments are therefore in a *phenomenon-reason* relationship with each other. An example of a segment consisting of more than one sentence can be seen below, where the relationship between the first part (sentence 1) and the second part (sentence 2-5) have to be read as part of the act of exemplification for the text to make sense.

*Naturally, the more people pay for their houses, the more they want to rename their neighborhoods. Suppose you have just coughed up $250,000 for an unspectacular house on the fringe of High Hill, an area with loads of cachet. The estate agent tells you it’s High Hill. You’ve paid a High Hill price. There is no way you are going to admit that it is in the center of New York.* (The Observer Magazine, March 1990: 5)

The interpretation of relations between textual segments is a cognitive act on the part of the reader, who might be supposed to be asking questions about the text as it unfolds, such as (for the first example) “The stress is on a documentary; why?” In this sense, reading the text is like a dialogue with the author. Whether this dialogue is a reality or an analytical construct is not a question that can be easily answered here, but a model which suggests this kind of interaction between reader and text or author might be able to capture difficulties readers experience in text processing and offer ways of attacking them.

It would be wrong to suggest that all texts are like the two sentences from our first example and that the whole operation of reading is some sort of perverse guessing game where authors made life difficult for readers.

Texts often contain strong clues or signals as to how we should interpret the relations between segments; there are not necessarily deterministic, but are supporting evidence to the cognitive activity of deducing the relations. Some types of signals include repetition and syntactic parallelism (using the same syntax in two or more different clauses to draw attention to a comparison or contrast). Here is an example in this sense:
The politicians were in a huff; the industrialists were in a rage, the workers were in the mood for a fight.

The parallelism of the ‘subject + be + prepositional phrase’ underlines the comparison between the three groups of people. The clause-relational approach takes all this evidence into account in its analyses.

Conclusions

Maybe we should also keep in mind as readers a certain degree of skepticism and avoid the assumption that everything we read is necessarily the truth. But this is another discussion. While the honorable function of language is to promote communication, we must remember that another of its historic functions, sometimes deliberate, sometimes accidental, is in concealing and confusing thought.

And it is even more difficult to initiate such a discussion with non-philological students (namely, students in Economics, studying Business English). The text specifications are nevertheless necessary, as long as they (the students) will (presumably) participate to international negotiations, where the right understanding of the message (both written and spoken) is essential.

References