From clause to discourse:
Managing written discourse

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This paper explores the main points where form and function, as two decisive facets of discourse analysis, interact to serve communication as a whole and written communication in particular. This potential increases if it is conceived of within a discourse analysis framework. It is suggested that in order for learners to manage the written mode of discourse they should be led gradually to proceed discourse propositionally and illocutionarily, operationalizing, thus, the form/function interaction. Arguably, handling discourse at these two levels is expected to enhance learners' formal and functional awareness.

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between form and function has been the subject of inquiry within different schools of linguistics. Research within schools has tipped sometimes in favour of form, sometimes in favour of function. In fact, what these schools did was to present language as if it were some incremental lists of forms or functions to be interiorized and used by language learners. This has turned out to be of little use to learners. What happened was that the two aspects were seen in a state of divorce. In fact, there is no justification for form and function to be in a state of mutual exclusiveness. None can survive without the other nor is one mere icing on the cake.

Discourse analysts take the view that both form and function play their appropriate parts in language use. The former being, as it were, the latter's actualizing means. Labov (1972) makes the point that the concern of a discourse analysis approach should be one that attends primarily to function (what is done with what is said). Candlin (1981) suggests that form and function are necessary but insufficient bearings when it is a matter of discourse. One task of discourse analysis, he points out, is to see to form/function relationship. He argues that

'…to do with 'rules' or 'maxims' for discourse, it does not merely suggest very clearly that an item-bank of speech-acts or 'notions' linked to an assortment of surface structure types… [This] must be as incomplete as a traditional list of grammatical patterns. Of course…[within a discoursal framework] learners have to be able to construct grammatically well-formed sentences and be aware of intra-sentential semantic equivalence, but they have also to manage the pragmatic values that utterances take on within discourse.' (Emphasis added) (Candlin 1981: 38)

With due consideration to form, discourse analysis is said to be functional in the sense that it attends to what people using their language do with it. In this connection, Candlin (1981) speaks of the language 'double perspective', which consists in looking at language as a dynamic two-faceted system of communicating. He posits that through a dynamic process of interpreting and creating meanings, the formal (the saying) and the functional (the doing) come to interact. Put another way, when it is a matter of discourse, where the processes of interpreting and creating meanings come into play, the relationship between form and function should be worked out, i.e. it does not stand ready-made. Particularly important is that there exists a many-to-one relationship between form and function (Widdowson 1978, 1979; McCarthy 1991). One form may achieve various functions and one function may be achieved by many forms. By way of illustration, a request may be realized now by a declarative, now by an interrogative, now by an imperative.

1- We should be most grateful if you would reconsider your decision to resign.
2- Would it be possible for you to reconsider your decision to resign?
3- Do me a favour and reconsider your decision to resign. (Rather informal)

The three utterances may be parts of a written exchange in which a requestor begs his/her requestee to comply with an action (non-resignation) for particular reasons.

McCarthy (1991) puts it that in addition to linguistic forms, discourse analysts are concerned with how it is that interactants interpret each other's grammar appropriately (e.g. one interactant commands, the other asks a question…), how it is that an instance of language use between interactants is coherent and not 'gobbledy-gook', what the roles of the interactants are in relation to each other, what rules or

conventions govern their interaction. It is, in fact, these functional relationships (relationships among utterances), that make up discourse, that uphold coherence in that discourse.

Within a pedagogical perspective, McCarthy (1991) argues that forms are to be seen as the 'raw material' discourse adherents draw upon to operate language functionally. Arguably, one could say that the grammar of language serves as the bearings to a discourse analysis undertaking.

The form/function interaction appears, then, to be crucial to discourse analysis and to language communication as a whole. One instance of this interaction is to look at a clause as an act of communication.

CLAUSE AS AN ACT

In this section, we shall attend more to how formal stretches (instances of the system), i.e. clauses, are meant to fulfil some acts (instances of use) and how these cohere to form a whole, viz. a coherent discourse. The three main clauses, declarative, interrogative and imperative will be presented as instances of act-actualizing devices. To begin with, let us state that it is fulfilment conditions that specify the communicative function of a given proposition. Confronted with an instance of language use in which a form, say, an interrogative, a declarative, or an imperative is used, a language user gets engaged in a kind of a heuristic process whereby he/she goes about providing relevant conditions which give the form in question a specific communicative value.

Within a language-as-process view the meaning of an interrogative (or any other clause) is defined according to what participants in discourse see adequate to the purpose of their interaction. To give an interrogative a particular communicative value (requesting, information-seeking, commanding, etc.) depends on the addresser's intention and addressee's interpretation. This comes about through a process of meaning negotiation whereby both addresser and addressee bring to the situation relevant clues[1] to construct the discourse.

A declarative clause is not always used to assert or give information by a sender to a recipient, as it was too often thought. Instances of use abound where the declarative form achieves other communicative functions and where it combines with other propositions and act-achieving devices to form larger units of language use. What people do with a declarative seems to go beyond its structure as a declarative in contrast with an interrogative or an imperative. Also, for discourse purposes, a declarative is to fit in the enactment of the discourse propositional (cohesion) and illocutionary (coherence) types of development.

Another no less important factor in the identification of the meaning of a declarative is its position in discourse. Any such a clause takes its appropriate place according to what is required illocutionarily. To uphold coherence in the discourse, acts will define each other's position; this will in its turn define the type of form to be chosen and its place among others in discourse.

The declarative clause, like its counterparts, changes its communicative value relative to conditions of its occurrence, including addresser's intention. Declaratives can also be used to actualize other functions such as instructing and advising.

The imperative clause as a formal linguistic pattern has too often been used to realize solely the function of commanding. This, one could say, is typical of this form. Some confusion may, nevertheless, arise if the intended meaning is different. That is, when conditions of use do not allow for the above interpretation. If one is

intent upon accounting appropriately for the communicative function of an imperative, it would be far better to rely on what it is intended to do. The imperative, as it is used usually to command, can be used also to instruct, to advise, to direct, to request, to invite, to urge people to do something (as is the case, for example, with advertisements), and other acts according to conditions attendant upon their occurrence.

Another act usually actualized by the imperative form is that of directing or giving directions. A typical situation in which the act in question is common is that in which a participant tells another one how to get to a particular place. The latter participant is assumed by the former to lack knowledge as to how to get to that place, while the former possesses enough of such knowledge to tell (to direct) his/her addressee. The latter needs this knowledge for a given purpose.

An imperative clause could also be found with other communicative functions such as the ones used in advertisements whereby a particular audience is, for instance, urged 'to buy' something advertised for by a particular advertiser. Those who want to 'sell' their products or make people use their services choose for this purpose different media to convince their audience of the qualities and merits of those products.

Issuing a command is subject to particular conditions different from those attendant upon the achievement of other acts, say a request. An imperative clause is commonly held to be typical of issuing a command; a fact which is, yet, disallowed by the various imperative-actualizing acts mentioned above. Unlike other acts under the imperative rubric, a command imposes some course of action that should be carried out (Lyons 1977). All conditions being met, the receiver of a command has no right to refusal. In a context where the imperative clause is meant to be a command, is that of adult/children exchange which requires an appropriate distribution of rights, duties, and in which roles of participants are such that they allow for accomplishing the intended act.

It is worthwhile to reiterate that it is conditions that invest a given form with a particular communicative function in a particular discourse and it is those same conditions (roles, rights, duties of participants, etc.) that help trace illocutionary development and help provide the most adequate interpretation.

In the preceding, we have been dealing with clauses as acts, probing mainly into their conditions of fulfilment and how it is that single forms can be used to accomplish a multitude of acts. It can be concluded, then, that a clause (a form) is not only used to make a statement, to ask a question, or to give a directive.

In other words, there is not a one-to-one relationship between form and function. Now let us see how form and function interact to weave strands of discourse.

FROM CLAUSE TO DISCOURSE: MANAGING WRITTEN DISCOURSE

In the previous sections, we have been exploring the relationship between form and function, on the one hand, and how such a relationship brings about the intended illocutionary act according to given conditions, on the other. This seems to set the stage for attempting to trace ways clauses combine on both formal and illocutionary levels to construct a whole discourse.

In this section, we attempt to attend more to both propositional and illocutionary types of development. Through these two important paths, we aim at satisfying discoursal requirements.

Propositional development concerns cohesion, while illocutionary development concerns coherence (Widdowson 1978, 1979). Language users need to identify ways clauses and parts of clauses (words, phrases…), formally organize their positioning relative to one another in a piece of discourse, embodied by a text, and their hierarchization within that text. This last point has to do with the fact that clauses are meant to be ranked differently and are not, therefore, always linearized (Van Dijk 1977). The main/subordinate clause dichotomy of Traditional Grammar epitomizes this point where the latter comes propositionally, as it were, to bring support to the former. Similarly, in semantic terms, a clause may contain a 'main' meaning to which is (are) subordinated some other lower-status meaning(s) conveyed via subordinate clauses. Other formal devices that help provide for propositional development are those exhaustively studied by Halliday and Hasan (Halliday and Hasan 1976). Belonging to the same formal category these are signposting devices that a discourse producer arranges his verbal 'product' with, and that a receiver avails himself of in his decoding process. In addition to these relationships, each item in a text refers semantically to an entity in the world (semantic reference).

The construction of a text, as conceived by its producer is such that words and groups of words relate in accordance with their grammatical structures and lexical meanings. On the same premises, clauses are linked to each other so as to develop propositionally, i.e. the content of one proposition being related in some way to another's.

Another set of formal clues that have a part to play in the fabric of a text is that of 'pointing' items (anaphoric and cataphoric elements) that usually substitute for others by signalling particular references within the text. Pronouns such as, 'she, which, they, it, etc.' are of this type. Of another type of substitutes (deictic elements) are 'adverbials' such as 'there' which refers to a place, 'then' to a point in time, etc. This class of elements, by replacing some entities in different clauses, does indeed assure a kind of backward and forward discourse extension for the sake of achieving cohesion and hence propositional development.

In semantic terms, one could say that the meaning content of each word in the proposition, or that of the proposition itself contributes to the enactment of meanings of other words and propositions. The items in a text define each other's meanings so as to allow for a larger meaning to be enacted. Once this is established, another meaning is to be settled, i.e. propositional meaning. On the other hand, the meaning of a proposition presupposes[2] (Widdowson 1979) the one in the preceding to keep up with the ongoing text. By the same token, the meaning of a preceding proposition relates to that of the following one through time sequence, introduced by items such as 'then', 'after that', 'next', etc. and the selected tense.…)

The above items are but some of the cohesive devices which are meant to provide for formal construction (syntactic and semantic) of a text, itself a recorded piece of discourse. Other devices used to uphold cohesion may be found in other types of texts.

Now, if cohesion is such as to provide for just one part of the 'story', coherence does provide for the remaining part. It is time now we looked beyond cohesive aspects to the realm of coherence. Some light should be cast on how a segment of discourse develops coherently (illocutionary development). Reference is made here to how propositions come to realize different acts (communicative functions) according to some conditions, and how these acts come to be bonded to

one another to provide for illocutionary development of discourse. The way acts are arranged in a piece of discourse is closely connected with the communicative purpose behind its production.

Besides, acts in a piece of discourse may seem linear. It is by no means evident whether they are not hierarchized (Widdowson 1979, Brown and Yule 1983). Both linearization and hierarchization as levels in the illocutionary organization of discourse are legitimate. This amounts to the fact that acts may be equally or unequally ranked. Along the same line of arguing, some other acts of a lower status can be bonded to some of the foregoing ones. The way acts are arranged helps sustain the world of discourse embodying, thus, the sender's communicative strategies. These would include facts about the receiver of the message (who the targeted receivers are, what their needs are, whether they are familiar with the product or with products of the same nature, and so on). The sender may ask the following questions pertaining to ways receivers would understand the message sent: how are my addressees to interact with my message? How are they to make sense of what I intend to transmit to them? How could I engage them to process discourse the way I see adequate to my purpose? Then, how should I arrange acts so as to achieve my purpose? Anyway, which strategy am I to choose that works better for my purpose?

Bearing in mind the contextual clues as to the production of the discourse under scrutiny readers as participants in the discourse are to work out the acts being actualized in utterances. This will require them to infer what these acts are intended to do by the writer, a strategy which would urge them to draw upon shared knowledge. To attend to conditions attendant upon act-occurrence is no less crucial. Once this is done, readers will explore the arrangement of acts in discourse so as to be aware of illocutionary development.

So, drawing upon his past knowledge both of 'similar events' and his knowledge of the world (Widdowson 1979, Brown and Yule 1983), whether in his MT or in a FL, the reader negotiating process will spark off getting to know what the writer wants to do with words..

It is, after all, up to the reader to 'decide'[3] on whether the acts being expressed are to be interpreted the way the writer intended them to be interpreted, according to some conditions of use. Likewise, the writer would assume that the recipient of his message is in need of being first informed of, say, 'an event', 'a state' then to be provided with some description and so on until he achieves acts he sees appropriate for the enactment of the discourse. Other assumptions by the writer may include any other relevant information about the reader that is likely to motivate his illocutionary options (acts and their arrangement in discourse). On his course of writing, he proceeds to a kind of assessment of the ways he is addressing his reader, taking into account all that he knows about him/her and providing as many cues as he sees necessary for his readers so as to work out the intended meaning.

As to discourse processing, the reader has, obviously, the choice to move downwards, i.e. departing from the general context and the world of discourse including its communicative function, then down to particular acts as achieved by different utterances, or to move upwards by exploring, first, acts (communicative functions) through different utterances and then working out the ways they are bonded to provide for the overall arrangement of discourse. Both avenues are legitimately open to readers.

Turning now to pedagogical relevance, and by attending to both propositional and illocutionary developments, learners will develop ways cohesion and coherence are respectively upheld. On the first front, they will need to make appeal to formal grammatical knowledge (grammatical competence). Whether this concerns intra-sentential relationships or inter-sentential ones, the knowledge of formal signalling devices (syntactic and semantic) should enable learners to trace various propositional meanings that make up discourse. On the second front, appeal is made to communicative values that propositional elements take on according to varying contexts of use. What learners seem to need further is a better handle on illocutionary development. What is more, learners need equally to know how these communicative values combine to create larger stretches of language use. By this last point, it is meant that learners are required to be discoursely competent.

CONCLUSION

Form and function are the two sides of the communicative interaction. They play a major role in upholding cohesion and coherence as two units of discourse. Managing written discourse depends heavily on being aware of such an interaction.In instructional terms, the benefits of the foregoing points to learners are twofold: they help them raise their discoursal awareness, and plot their course of writing activity, managing, thus, propositional and illocutionary developments. Learners have, obviously, to proceed first to the exploration of the above strategies through written material (by others) so as to be maximally familiar with their mplementation, then through a step-by-step process of involvement they will change their camp from mere 'recipients' to 'agents' in the process of written communication.

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[1]-This includes, in the main, felicity conditions, Cooperative Principle (CP) and shared knowledge.
[2] - This type of presupposition is the semantic one and not the pragmatic one (Levinson 1983).
[3]-In spite of the fact that one would not aspire for a one-hundred-percent congruence between writer's intention and reader's interpretation, some standard of understanding by the reader is, yet, achievable.