Chapter 4

THE BASIC CATEGORIES OF DISCOURSE

In the previous three chapters, it has been shown that it is justifiable – I would even say necessary – to examine in depth the basic units of discourse analysis. In particular, it is important to see whether or not what I have called the dissertation act is one of such units, as I propose.

It is the purpose of chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7, which constitute the second part of this Ph.D. thesis, to present the arguments that substantiate my claim. In this chapter (4), the essence of such arguments will be introduced, and they will be developed in the other three.

As the analysis will have to be rather detailed at certain points, there is a danger that it could be seen as taking a life of its own. Therefore, at the end of each chapter, there will be one or two sections that place the issues dealt with in a wider theoretical perspective or relate them to matters of more direct concern to the applied linguist or the language teacher. Although some of the contents here will be mere suggestions for further research or pedagogical developments, I hope they will help to show the connections between the analysis and the concerns represented in the previous chapters.

Approaches

As was stated in Chapter 1, discourse analysis has used three units: the sentence, the proposition and the illocutionary act. There are three approaches to distinguish them. There is the approach which Strawson followed in order to distinguish the sentence from the proposition, in 1950. There is the approach followed by Austin to establish the concept of illocutionary act, at the end of the 50's. And there is, besides these two approaches from analytic philosophy, the approach

which Widdowson followed to introduce the distinction between sentence and illocutionary act in applied linguistics, in the early 70's.

The first approach, Strawson's, is essentially the same approach which Searle adopted in the 60's, when he combined and reformulated Strawson's and Austin's distinctions. But he made some variations and introduced some terminology. For this reason it might be convenient to call this approach 'the Strawson-Searle approach'.

As has been said in the previous chapters, it seems to me that a fourth unit is needed: the 'dissertation act'. I believe one must distinguish between illocution and dissertation. My point is that dissertation acts are not subtypes of illocutionary acts, as has been considered in philosophy and applied linguistics. Rather, they constitute a category at the same hierarchical level.

Let us consider the proposal from the point of view of the three approaches mentioned previously, the Strawson-Searle approach, Austin's approach, and Widdowson's approach.

Strawson and Searle

As a starting point, let us remember the purpose Strawson (1950) had when he distinguished between sentence and what is now often called proposition. His purpose was to clarify certain issues in the discussion of one of the central themes in the philosophy of language: the relations between meaning and truth. More specifically, Strawson wanted to make clear, and criticize, certain points in Bertrand Russell's treatment of sentences such as:

(1) The king of France is wise.

Russell had proposed that a sentence that makes sense was one that had a truth value, that was either true or false. Given that we understand (1), it makes sense, and therefore, it has to be true or false. But, how can it be true or false, if it refers to a non-existent entity (the king of France)?

This reasoning took Russell, through a somewhat complex but very interesting route, to some rather implausible conclusions. It is not necessary to consider his approach in detail, because what Strawson did was to question Russell's first assumption, namely the direct association of meaning with truth and falsity.

Strawson showed that we cannot say that the sentence, as such, is true or false. It does not make sense, because what is true or false is the proposition that is being expressed with the sentence (Strawson 1950: 7). The sentence does not refer to anything. If a speaker uses the sentence at a given moment of History, she will be referring to a certain person; but if another speaker uses the same sentence at a different time, he will be referring to another person. Hence, different propositions will be expressed on each occasion; and one might be true while the other might be false.

For Strawson, the meaning of a sentence is what allows us to express with it a number of propositions. The meaning of the sentence is not one of these propositions (Strawson 1950: 12). Furthermore, which proposition is being expressed on a given occasion depends on the moment and the context in which the sentence is used.

Then, with the same sentence, different propositions can be expressed. The opposite is also true: the same proposition can be expressed with different sentences. For example, it is possible to say, in the XVIII century:

(2) The king of France is hated.

The same proposition can be expressed with:

(3) Louis XVI is hated.

Searle describes this by saying that the sentence and the proposition have distinct identity criteria (Searle 1969: 24). To say that on two occasions the same sentence is used, we consider the selection and the order of words. To say that the same proposition is being expressed we consider what is being referred to and what is being said of it.

Now, the most important thing about Searle's work is that it shows that illocutionary acts have different criteria from both sentences and propositions. Their criteria have to do with the social relations between speaker and hearer and with the speaker's intentions.

What Searle does is to present pairs of situations with some variation; for example, in one case we may have:

(4) I promise to come tomorrow.

And in the other:

(5) I promise not to come tomorrow.

It is shown here that the identity of the illocutionary act, a promise, can be kept when the proposition is varied – from one where "to come" is predicated to another where the negation, "not to come", is predicated –.

To show the opposite another pair can be presented. Let us consider (4) and (6):

(4) I promise to come tomorrow.

(6) I do not promise to come tomorrow.

Here, we have the same proposition with different illocutions.

One important innovation that Searle makes is to redefine the proposition as (simply as) the association of a subject and a predicate. The assertion of a proposition is, thus, distinguished from the proposition itself. Therefore, the question of the truth value of a proposition does not always arise. It does not arise with respect to every proposition, but only with respect to asserted propositions. That is to say, in the following examples, (7) and (8), we have the same proposition.

(7) The sky is blue today.

(8) Is the sky blue today?

But in (7) the proposition is asserted and in (8) it is not. We have two different acts – for Searle, two different illocutionary acts –. These are an assertion and a question, or suspended assertion.

Now, what I wish to show is that the assertion and the question are not illocutionary acts, but dissertation acts. The divergence between the current doctrine and my proposal can be formulated as follows. For the current doctrine, in a simple case what the analyst will recognize in an utterance are: a sentence, a proposition and an act – let us say, an assertion or a request –. What I say is that, besides the sentence and the proposition, we can recognize both the assertion and the request – or the assertion and an offer –.

To show that four basic units are needed, rather than three, a situation can be presented, and then elements of it can be varied to create comparison pairs. This will be done systematically in the following chapter, in order to show that dissertation acts have different identity criteria from sentences, propositions, and illocutionary acts. For the present purposes, only illocution and dissertation will be considered, and this will be done in a brief way.

Let us suppose that somebody, let us call him Richard, has before him a form to fill in. Michael takes out a pen and says:

(9) You haven't got a pen.

By contrast, suppose that Michael does not use (9), but (10):

(10) Have you got a pen?

In both cases we have the same illocutionary act: the offering of a pen. But we have different dissertation acts: an assertion and a question.

To show the converse, let us suppose that Charles asks Dianne:

(11) How many kinds of poetry are there?

to which she responds:

(12) Three: one of sounds, one of images and one of ideas.

By contrast, let us suppose that Gustavo writes in an essay:

(13) How many kinds of poetry are there? Three: one of sounds, one of images, and one of ideas.

In both cases, Charles's and Gustavo's, we have the same dissertation act: a question. But we have different illocutionary acts. In the first case, we have a request for information, or opinion rather. In the second case, the question does not request an answer, but announces it. It is part of a unit that provides information, or opinion.

In sum, it is possible to have the same illocution with different dissertation acts and the same dissertation act with different illocutions. This places the proposal for a fourth unit of analysis within the Strawson-Searle approach. Let us now consider Austin's approach.

Austin

Austin's work, developed after Strawson's and before Searle's, is also related to the theme of truth and meaning. But it differs from Strawson's work in that its purpose is not to delimit the units about which truth value considerations are strictly pertinent, but rather to show that often such considerations are not relevant.

Austin would tell us, for example, that when a priest baptizes a child, he is not saying that he is baptizing the child; he is baptizing him. He is not stating that the child has a certain name; he is making the child's name to be so (Austin 1962: 6-7).

To order is not to describe the ordering. To insult is not to describe the insulting. To forgive is not to describe the forgiving. Ordering, insulting and forgiving are not descriptions of facts; they are the facts. It does not make sense, then,

to ask whether they are true or not, at least not in the sense that we ask whether a description is true or not.

Doing with words, through words. From here Austin arrives at the concept of 'speech act', which is initially a metaphor. It is a metaphor that conveys a simile, a comparison: speech is like action.

Action can be the consequence of action. And it can be the consequence of words, too. That is the point of comparison. But, how can it be? How can words be said to bring about action, given that they are of such a different nature?

How do the two interact? Austin, in a brilliant instant, gives us a glimpse of the answer. He tells us that words inaugurate consequential action (Austin 1962: 15).

To follow the route indicated by Austin, we have to realize that the term 'inaugurate' has two readings. Firstly, it means precedence, which implies that words and actions meet as equals in some terrain. Words initiate, they come first in a series of events where actions follow. Secondly, inauguration is the ritual whereby actions are recognized and legitimated, whereby their existence is accepted.

The two readings are complementary. Words allow actions into the terrain of discourse, and it is so that words can be like actions; because actions become like words.

We are in the domain of acceptability, of appropriateness. Words, speech acts, make actions proper or improper. To strike a person with the fist is no longer inappropriate after receiving an insult from that person. Until recently, sexual relations used to be socially unacceptable unless they had been previously validated by the utterance of 'I do' before the judge or registrar. We are, indeed, in the terrain of civil life.

What is important, then, is to realize that physical actions are interpretable as social acts, just as words are, and as social acts they are subject to being judged socially. Furthermore, it is essentially through words, through speech acts, that the conditions for the interpretation and judgement of action are created and

modified. (And of course, it is also through speech acts that interpretation and judgement conditions for speech acts themselves are established.)

Let us illustrate this view with an anecdote. A friend and I were at a party among people with whom we did not have much familiarity. What we were saying and doing was, therefore, rather conspicuous, or so we felt. It was easy to do something embarrassing. I was particularly vigilant of my voice volume and was carefully registering my behaviour. I was also paying special attention to my friend's conduct.

There was a pause in our conversation. My friend took the opportunity to move his hand towards his pocket, and he said: "I am going to have a cigarette." After a short while, when he was already smoking, I asked him why he had informed me of something which was evident, or if it was not at the moment, it would become so immediately. He puzzled and said: "I don't know; I suppose it wasn't really necessary." Then I replied: "But I think you would not have dared to take the cigarette out if you had not made the announcement." "It's true," he said; "it would have been awkward, specially in this situation."

What would have been awkward, what would have been inappropriate, is to have interrupted the conversation, to have upset the sequence of questions, answers and comments that we were developing. In the situation we were in, taking out the cigarette would have counted as an interruption, and to interrupt was not appropriate. Of course, in other situations the same action could have a different signification.

What my friend's announcement did was to change the situation. He did not change it very much. His action still counted as an interruption; but it was no longer inappropriate.

It is not difficult to find more examples of the use of words to make appropriate actions that will interrupt a communicative event: "please, sit down", "this call will cost you a fortune", "can you hold on a second?", "I'm sorry, it's getting late, will you excuse us?".

The theme of interruptions is very convenient to illustrate the thesis that illocutionary acts create and modify appropriateness conditions. With a rather

brief exposition, it has been possible to show how requests, invitations and so on operate in this area. But there is no reason to suppose that illocutionary acts operate in an essentially different way in other areas.

It is possible to imagine, for example, that the organization of labour depends on making some actions inappropriate and others appropriate, though of course it does not depend only on this. The same can be said of family life. And it is possible to imagine, without needing to make a detailed analysis, that this constant definition and redefinition of appropriateness conditions is effected by requests, invitations, orders, offers, and many illocutionary acts for which we often do not have a name.

Now, if the point of illocutionary acts is determined in a formulation like the previous one, it is not difficult to see that dissertation acts are not illocutionary acts. An assertion or, being more specific, a definition, a classification or generalization, does not inaugurate consequential action, which does not mean that it does not have any effect on action. It does, but not through the conditions of appropriateness or acceptability of actions. Dissertation acts have an effect on action because they modify our knowledge.

Let us consider an example to illustrate the distinction. Let there be two cases. On the one hand, there is a no-smoking sign in a railway car. On the other hand, there is a packet of cigarettes with the inscription: "smoking is dangerous". For lack of better terms, let us call these 'prohibition' and 'warning'.

Let us suppose that both, the sign and the inscription, are read and understood, but that each is ignored by its reader. The person who smokes in spite of the prohibition is performing a forbidden act. The person who smokes in spite of the warning is not performing a forbidden act. Some people might say that he is performing a stupid action, because of the consequences it can have – though the smoker might reply that obtaining pleasure is intelligent –.

The no-smoking sign establishes the prohibition, makes the act a forbidden one. The inscription "smoking is dangerous" does not make the action dangerous. This warning makes us aware of the danger. Its point is to create a certain knowledge, or at least make it present, if it already exists.

To summarize, following the Strawson-Searle approach, it is possible to show that dissertation acts and illocutionary acts have different identity criteria. Following Austin's approach, it is possible to show that dissertation acts do not inaugurate consequential action; rather, they modify knowledge. Let us now consider the matter following Widdowson's approach.

Widdowson

Widdowson's approach is rather more linguistic than the previous two, in so much as he discusses discourse analysis units with regard to their rules of combination. His concern arises from the realization that the capacity to compose grammatically correct sentences does not necessarily imply the ability to produce and understand discourse. A student may have reached a considerable degree of command of English grammar and yet not be able to participate feliciously in a dialogue in English, or not be able to write a coherent paragraph in English.

Widdowson distinguishes two ways of organizing stretches of language. The first can be clearly observed in the following passage:

> However, despite this enthusiasm for education and interest in pansophy the proposal to establish a pansophical college fell to the ground although several locations for it were suggested. But the clouds of civil war rendered such plans abortive and Comenius only stayed in London for nine months. When he left he made promises to the Hartlib group that he would continue to work for pansophy and return at a more favourable time; he kept up a correspondence with his English friends for the rest of his life, though the opportunity for a return never came.
>
> (Sadler 1969: 9)

The string "return at a more favourable time" can be reconstructed into the full clause:

(14) he would return at a more favourable time.

This reconstruction is equivalent to the interpretation that the "incomplete" string would have in the context of Sadler's extract (though one should not, and

one need not, be committed to the idea that the reader does reconstruct the clause; the actual psychological mechanism of interpretation is outside the scope of this kind of deliberation). In other words, the reader knows that the tacit subject of "return" is "he", and she also knows that the tacit modality of the verb phrase is the same as that carried by "would" in the previous clause. The reader knows that this is so because "return", in the incomplete clause, and "continue", in the previous complete clause, are both the same kind of verb form (infinitive minus 'to').

The interpretation of the string "return at a more favourable time", by relation to its previous clause, is then mediated by morphosyntactic principles. Other parts of grammar also intervene in the co-interpretation of sections of the text. For example, "he" in the third sentence has to be related to "Comenius" in the second; and this is possible because "he" is the third person singular masculine pronoun.

"Plans" in the second sentence has to be related to "proposal" in the first sentence; this is possible because there is already a relationship between the two terms in the semantic system of English.

We are talking about co-interpretation links between parts of a text. These links are not grammatical, in the strict sense of the term. They go beyond the clause, and even beyond the sentence. And they involve purely textual factors, such as the order of clauses and sentences. But the links depend on grammatical factors, such as morphosyntactic rules and semantic relations. Following Widdowson (1973: 96), we can say of a text which exhibits this type of links that it is cohesive.

Cohesion has another two kinds of determinants, besides co-interpretation links based on grammatical information:

1) Simple repetition and the use of terms in the same semantic field; for example, the repetition of 'pansophy' and 'return', or the use of 'education' and 'college'. This gives the text a sort of semantic density which indicates that the various clauses are part of the same whole.

obtain among sentences, as cohesion does. It is the link between the acts realized with the sentences.

The knocking action is interpreted as an act of request to initiate a communicative event, which in turn will have other purposes – perhaps a request to be allowed in –. As a reply to this act, B asks a question, which continues the process of establishing the conditions for further acts A and B might realize. Without actually answering B's question, A makes an assertion that defines two such conditions: A's identity and the point to be dealt with in subsequent events. Perhaps the identification is not very specific, perhaps all B knows after the assertion is that A is the person that brings the third film. But that is sufficient in the context for B to find it acceptable to invite A to come in – of course, B also finds it desirable –.

We, then, have a request and a reply, an initiation and a follow up, the follow up and an invitation. It is thus that the dialogue is coherent.

Cohesion and coherence: two levels of organization. Two levels with distinct units. Cohesion obtains among sentences, and coherence among illocutionary acts. A large number of the stretches of language that we produce everyday are coherent. Many of them are also cohesive.

The important thing about Widdowson's approach is that it justifies the distinction between sentence and illocutionary acts by showing that it is necessary in order to talk about different kinds, or different levels of organization. When Widdowson considers the proposition in the late seventies, he sees it sometimes in relation to cohesion, and sometimes in relation to coherence, without assigning it a specific level of organization.

It is possible to continue along the initial path and arrive at a more consistent theory. It is possible to adopt van Dijk's criterion for the organization of propositions. According to him, if the facts our discourse is about are connected in the world, then our discourse is coherent (van Dijk 1980: 28-29). To avoid confusion with Widdowson's coherence, let us call van Dijk's kind of discourse unity 'connection', a term which he himself uses sometimes.

It is necessary to consider van Dijk critically, because he tends to reduce all discourse unity to connection. It is necessary to realize that this is only one level of unity. It is clear, as he would say, that if we talk about sun-tan lotion, scuba diving and coconut beverages, then our discourse will have unity, because these are things and activities that we see when we go to the beach. And it will have unity even if it does not have much cohesion. But it is also true that we can have cohesion without connection. A most radical example is the following chain answer proving that a carriage is nothing:

> A carriage is a trap, a trap is a gin, gin is a spirit, a spirit is a ghost, and a ghost is nothing.
>
> (Recorded in Opie, P. and I. 1959: 85)

In this answer to a schoolchildren enigma there is unity only because of the organization of topics and the repetition of words. The topic of the first sentence is the carriage. In the comment to it we find a trap, which in turn becomes the topic of the next sentence, and so on.

Between the enigma (something like "Do you know why a carriage is nothing?") and the answer there is coherence; one illocutionary act is the reply to the other. And within the answer there is cohesion. These two kinds of unity obtain even when there is no connection. Of course, the cohesion and coherence we find here are sufficient only in schoolchildren language games. In another domain, such a discourse would be anomalous, and perhaps the game depends precisely on — it makes sense because of — the anomaly. But this does indicate the recognition by native speakers of cohesion and coherence as levels of unity distinct from connection.

It is then possible to make explicit the principle which Widdowson follows when he distinguishes between sentence and illocutionary act. It is possible to require that every different unit of discourse correspond to a different level of discourse unity. It is possible to have this requirement even if Widdowson himself does not assign a specific level of unity for propositions. It is possible to do this because we can take from van Dijk the corresponding principle of unity, which is distinct from the other two principles.

Now, if my proposal is valid, if illocution and dissertation must be distinguished, it should be possible to recognize two different levels of discourse unity, corresponding to the two units. To show that this is so, let us consider a pair of examples that was used earlier. In the first case, we had a dialogue between Charles and Dianne:

(11) How many kinds of poetry are there?

(12) Three: one of sounds, one of images, and one of ideas.

In the second case, we had an extract from an essay by Gustavo:

(13) How many kinds of poetry are there? Three: one of sounds, one of images, and one of ideas.

In the first case, in the dialogue, there is a request, for information or opinion. This is followed by the act of providing such information or opinion, by an offer, for lack of a better term. The relation between request and offer is a relation of coherence.

In the second case, in Gustavo's essay, there is no coherence, because there is no request; the question is rhetorical. But this does not mean that it stops being a question. Nor does it mean it cannot have an answer. In fact, the next assertion is its answer. And the relation between question and assertion gives the essay unity, even though it does not have the coherence between request and offer which the dialogue has. This level of discourse unity between dissertation acts can be called 'consistency'.

Two points must be noted. The first is that while the principal level of unity in Gustavo's essay is consistency, and though it does not have the dialogue's coherence, it does not mean that coherence is totally absent from the essay. What happens is that there is no coherence between the elements of the essay, but the essay as a whole provides information (or opinion). And this providing takes place in certain illocutionary conditions.

The second point to note is that, though we have contrasted the consistency of Gustavo's essay with the coherence of the dialogue between Charles and Dianne, it should not be implied that the dialogue lacks consistency.

The dialogue is both, coherent and consistent, because there is unity both between illocutionary acts and between dissertation acts. There is a relation between the request and the offer, and at the same time, there is a relation between the question and the assertion.

Summary

In the current theories, three basic units for discourse analysis are considered: the sentence, the proposition, and the illocutionary act. I propose the inclusion of a fourth unit: the dissertation act.

I have placed my proposal within each of the three approaches that we have for the discussion of discourse units, approaches which I have summarized and partly criticized. I have said that it is possible to show that dissertation acts and illocutionary acts have different identity criteria. I have also said that dissertation acts do not inaugurate consequential action, as illocutionary acts do; rather, they affect action because they modify knowledge, or make it present. Finally, I have shown that consistency between dissertation acts is not the same as coherence between illocutionary acts.

Implications

In other words, the basic categories for discourse analysis are the four units and their corresponding kinds of unity: the sentence and cohesion, the proposition and connection, the illocutionary act and coherence, the dissertation act and consistency. What are the consequences of this for applied linguistics and language teaching?

The main point, now that we see four separate levels, is that previously we may not have observed important phenomena or we may have confused them. This is, in fact, what happened to Ellis when he analysed the dialogue I discussed in Chapter 2 (Ellis 1984: 108). He was only concerned with the illocutionary

dimension of discourse and did not realize the Portuguese boy was surprisingly competent at the dissertation level. This is, too, what happened to the Xochimilco team, whose project was also discussed in Chapter 2. The lack of a proper distinction between illocution and dissertation made us classify under the same heading acts which really belong in different dimensions, and, therefore, perceive sequences of unrelated acts. One conclusion, then, is that the evaluation of different forms of teaching which depends on such analyses ought to be revised.

Another point is that, as our view of discourse is broadened, we can refine our research questions in promising areas. Consider, for example, the area of conversational modifications. Some questions we can now ask are: Do modifications at the sentence level have the same effect as modifications at the proposition, the illocution or the dissertation level? Do useful modifications preserve unity at some levels?

Given that our conception of discourse units has been central to our ways of approaching teaching, we might also rethink our objectives. The development of the communicative approach, at least in its initial years, was conditioned to a considerable extent by a notion of language capacity which implies a doubtful relationship between units. Some of the main proponents of the approach, perhaps starting with Dick Allwright, said that, as communicative competence included most of linguistic (*ie*, syntactic) competence, we need only be concerned with communicative competence (Allwright 1979: 168). If we did, then "linguistic competence would take care of itself" (in words he used in oral presentations since the early seventies, including, for example, a paper he delivered at the 1975 AILA Congress).

The translation of the idea to discourse is: we need only worry about acts. If we do, students will learn sentences. However, if sentences and acts belong in different levels and behave according to different unity principles, how could someone derive sentences from acts? This issue certainly deserves more discussion. It will be carried out in Chapter 7.

The four level view could also be useful in characterizing types of courses. It would seem, for example, that in the past, general English courses used to be concerned with sentences almost exclusively and are now more devoted to illocutionary acts. By contrast, the main interest in notional English for Academic Pur-

poses (EAP)[1] courses would be the level of propositions, whereas the principal objectives of functional EAP courses have to do with dissertation acts. Probably EOP courses respond to needs related both to illocutionary and dissertation acts. If this is a fair approximation to the ELT scene, then a further enquiry into the differences between illocution and dissertation might contribute elements to organize our syllabi better. It is my intention to identify such elements in chapters 8 and 9 and to show how they could be used in Chapter 10. Now, let us proceed with the enquiry.

Capter 4 notes

1. The concept of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) was originally associated with the idea of specialized varieties of English mentioned in Chapter 3, although with time it came to refer more often to courses where special attention is given to the devlopment of certain skills, such as reading, or, more specifically, summarizing a text or finding certain information in it. Notional EAP syllabi are organized around supposedly general notions about entities in the world, such as volume. They were originally proposed as an alternative to functional syllabi, which are organized mainly in terms of speech acts. Four important founding proposals of EAP are collected in The British Council 1975 and a considerable amount of bibliographical information is gathered in The British Council 1976. A fairly comprehensive review of issues involved in EAP discussions is Robinson 1980. Good accounts of the most important schools of thought in the area are the books by Trimble and Swales already mentioned in Chapter 3 (Trimble 1985 and Swales 1990). Probably the oldest specialized journal in the area (which continues appearing to this day) is *the ESPecialist*, which is published in Sao Paulo, Brasil.