

05. Linguistic analysis of impairment data.

05.03. Textual analysis of impaired speech samples.

05.03.04. Textual coherence at the *informative* level: basic textual superstructures. Themes and Rhemes.

When analysing contextualised verbal samples from natural communicative situations, the overriding consideration is that of CONTEXT. This concept can be viewed in a simple way, as a general framework or basis in which the speech act occurs, or it can be approached in a more elaborate way by addressing the conversational partners' cognitive constructs.

The deictic elements analysed when studying morphosyntactic cohesion find their semantic value only by reference to the enunciative context, which in turn leads to what Fishman's *Sociology of Language* termed the SOCIO-COMMUNICATIVE SITUATION.

An essential part of the communicative context, whether understood in its simple or its complex sense, is what we frequently refer to as the COTEXT, that is, the discursive frame in which language is inserted. When considering sentences (grammatical units) from the point of view of pragmatic use, a new type of unit can be found: the speech turn (that is, a natural unit). Other frequently-used terms, as we know, are speech act and utterance.

Each speech act effectively occurs in a chain of messages, and those messages form an overall, whole and coherent communicative structure, turning them into a communicative (Hymes, Gumperz) and text event. To refer to this overall structure formed by linked speech acts (and these can be both oral and written acts) we will be using the concept of SUPERSTRUCTURE, coined by Teun Van Dijk in the 1970s in his discussion on Text Linguistics.

Obviously, identifying a textual structure that is superior to the sentence did not just happen in the decade of the 1970s; classic rhetoric (the predecessor of pragmatics) had already identified fixed schemata in the production of texts, as can be seen in this example from Antifonte.

-resumen de Antifonte:		
EXORDIO	A. captatio benevolentiae (seducción) B. partitio (plan del discurso)	agradar
NARRACIÓN	C. rasgos: 1. desnudez estilística 2. Preargumentación D. elementos 1. hechos 2. descripciones	convencer
CONFIRMACIÓN	E. proposición o causa F. argumentación G. digresión	
EPÍLOGO	H. posita in rebus (resumen) I. posita in affectibus (<u>apelación</u> sentimental)	conmover

ANTECEDENTES DEL CONCEPTO DE SUPERESTRUCTURA
Esquema del discurso según Antifonte (ca. 480-411 a. Xto), discípulo de Gorgias.

In Van Dijk (1978: 54ss) macrostructure is presented as an overall semantic text structure:

"the macrostructure of a text is therefore an abstract representation of the overall structure of meaning of a text".

Text macrostructure enables speakers to establish the topic of a text; the topic is deduced from the macro-rules, which are:

"the formal reconstruction of this 'deduction' of a topic, meaning that the topic of a text is exactly the same as what we have called macrostructure, or one part of it". (1978: 58).

The basic macro-rules are omit, select, generalise and construct or integrate; in Van Dijk (1989: 48) they are reduced to three: suppression, generalisation and construction¹. Van Dijk argues that the macrostructure is not a notion that is exclusive to text science, but that its general principles are pertinent for processing complex semantic information in general. They are essential in any cognitive model that accounts for comprehension and production of discourse, observation of episodes, participation and interpretation of action and interaction, solution of problems and general thought. (Van Dijk, 1989: 56)

In order to attempt to differentiate both concepts, Van Dijk (1978: 142) proposes the following metaphor:

"a superstructure is a type of text form, whose object, the topic, that is, the macrostructure, is the content of the text".

What they have in common is that they are not defined in relation to sentences or isolated sequences in a text, but for the text "as a whole" or for certain fragments of it. Superstructure also determines the ordering of the parts of a text (known as *dispositio* in classic rhetoric), which means identifying certain "units". Its articulation depends on a series of rules belonging to our general communicative ability, and they are independent of grammatical rules. Consequently, we can think that there is a minimum number of conventional textural structures², recognisable by all members of a community.

Narrative superstructure

The receiver recognises that a sequence of sentences is a narration, based on things that depend either on their knowledge of the world (Sacks, 1972a) or on the structure of the text.

Analysis of conversational stories has demonstrated their close level of interdependence with another type of more institutionalised story. D. Tannen (1989) points to the earlier nature of conversational stories compared to literary stories, and underlines the importance of narrative schemata in all our mental constructions. To support this, he quotes J. Bruner, for whom narrative thought "*strives to put its timeless miracles into the particulars of experience, and to locate the experience in time and place*". (apud. Tannen, 1989:28). Narrative thought thus appears as an organising principle that presides over our perception and understanding of the world, so that literary narration becomes considered as a refinement of conversational story-telling (Tannen, 1989:102). Our perception of the world tends to mentally organise events adapting them to a narrative-like schemata that gives them congruence.

This means that conversational stories all have a similar macrostructure that feeds off the cultural concept of literary "tale" or "narration". The typical structure of fictional stories (whose

¹ Suppression: given a sequence of propositions, all those that are not presuppositions of the subsequent propositions of the sequence are eliminated;

Generalisation: given a sequence of propositions, a proposition is made that contains a concept derived from the concepts of the sequence of propositions; the resulting proposition substitutes the original sequence;

Construction: given a sequence of propositions, a proposition is made that denotes the same fact denoted by the complete sequence of propositions, and the original sequence is substituted by the new proposition.

² This raises a very interesting topic for research that lies, however, outside the scope of this syllabus; new information and communication technologies are configuring new textual uses that are continually moving beyond classic textual linearity. If, as we assume here, there is a correspondence between textual superstructures and cognitive schemata: what new superstructures are being developed by the citizens/students that Henry Jenkins calls "digital natives"?

origins lie in conversational narrative, much earlier than literature) is incorporated into the speaker's cognitive baggage and used by them in their conversational stories. This is important because we can predict to a large extent what elements the interviewee will incorporate into their story, whether they are telling us about their own life or any other story.

In research into the schemata underlying each kind of text, and specifically narrative text, various disciplines converge. In the specific field of linguistics, we can point to the particular contributions of socio-linguistics (W.Labov, 1972), discourse analysis (Labov and Fanshel, 1977) and text grammar (W. Kintsch and T.van Dijk, 1975; T.van Dijk, 1978). But we can generally make out two broad lines: artificial intelligence studies (frames and scripts) and cognitive psychology studies (scenarios and schemata)³.

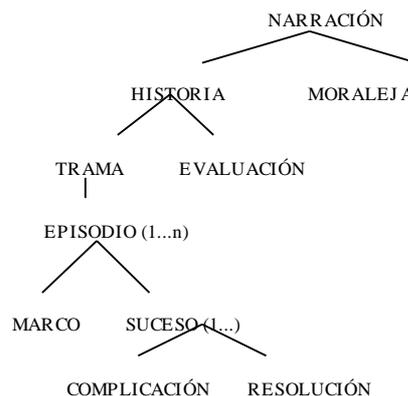
Labov defined narration as:

“one method of recapitulating past experience by matching a verbal sequence of clauses to the sequence of events which (it is inferred) actually occurred”.
(1972:359-360).

The most elaborate narrative structures present this outline:

- abstraction or synopsis, summarising the story.
- orientation: identifies time, place, characters, etc., frequently in imperfect indicative.
- narrative sentences (complicating action): the only essential element. Generally in indefinite and with a basic structure: subject + predicate + complement + adjuncts.
- evaluations: give sense and interest to the story, together with their place in its conversational context.
- outcome.
- finale: sententious expressions that warn of the ending. They function as a bridge between the narration and the conversational frame (*Y eso - and that's it, Y eso es todo - and that's all, Así son las cosas - that's the way things are*).

The concept of TEXTUAL SUPERSTRUCTURE comes from text linguistics and attempts to profile abstract schemata underlying the production of a particular text. They are mental schemata used by the speaker to construct their discourse. Following W.Labov's research, T. Van Dijk (1978) proposed the following superstructure:



Narrative superstructure, Van Dijk, 1978:156.

³ FRAMES are fixed structures that refer to stereotyped situations, whilst SCRIPTS incorporate sequences of facts. SCENARIOS are also limited to very specific situations, whilst SCHEMATA are described as sequences of facts, socially and culturally determined and with fixed conventional structures.

The nucleus of a conversational narrative text is the incident, that consists of a complication, or a first event that triggers the story, and a reaction or resolution in which the consequences of this event are reflected in the story characters. The incident is a recursive category, as there can be several in the same story.

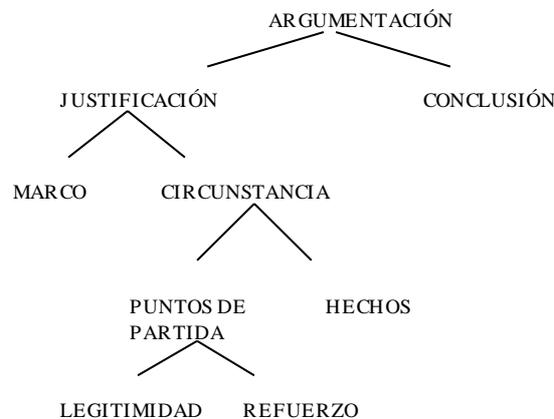
Incident and situation, or frame, together constitute an episode. The situation leads to part of what Polanyi (1985) identified as descriptive structure, and includes the story's contextualisation details. The episode is, therefore, the contextualised incident. It is also a recursive category, and the set of episodes that make up the story are called the plot. The plot draws together what we have differentiated as narrative and descriptive structure, and opposes evaluation, which clearly leads to what we shall call the evaluative structure.

The story itself, then, is the conjunction of plot and evaluation. But the case may also arise in which the story finishes with a moral or final conclusion that the audience has to extract from the narration. Some of these categories may be implicit, or simply blurred. For example, evaluations cannot be set up in specific clauses, but rather spread throughout the story "peppering" the narrative structure with implicit forms (modals, adverbs, certain connectors, etc., can indicate evaluation, with which the narrator interferes in the simple telling of facts).

Argumentation

This is the most-studied superstructure in logic and philosophy. The basic outline is a hypothesis (premise)- conclusion sequence. The argumentative structure of a text should be viewed against the background of persuasive dialogue. Compared to logical argumentation, everyday linguistic argumentation rarely takes into account relations of necessity between premise and conclusion, but rather moves between parameters of credibility, probability, etc.

(Van Dijk, 1978: 160) proposes this superstructure:



Hypotheses can be subdivided into lower categories, although they may also not be present (but implicit) in everyday arguments of the type:

- "Estoy enfermo, luego no puedo salir" (I'm ill, so I can't go out)

- "Pedro ha sacado un cuatro, luego no ha aprobado" (Pedro got four, so he didn't pass)

When hypotheses are not explicit, it is taken as read that one circumstance is sufficient for another, but it should be remembered that in each case a more general implicit hypothesis is presupposed:

- "cuando se está enfermo, no se sale" (when one is ill, one doesn't go out)

- "sacar una nota inferior a cinco supone no aprobar" (getting a lower mark than five means not passing)

That is, if one wishes to explain the argumentative structure, there must be a basis for relating the conclusions and for the conditional semantic relation between the circumstances on which the conclusion is based (Van Dijk, 1978: 159). Van Dijk terms this type of category

"guarantee" or "legitimacy", as it authorises someone to draw a certain conclusion; the conclusion can also be explained better by providing "backing" that explicitly shows the link between premise and conclusion ("as a mark of four is not enough..."). The "frame" of the argument places the information in a context (in the example, the context of the exam, which is taken as read).

Themes and Rhemes, Topics and Comments

We have seen that the superstructure arises as a structural concept that transcends the syntactic level and places itself at the textual, discursive level; we can say in parallel that sentence semantics becomes informative structure when place ourselves at textual level.

From the informative point of view, speech acts put the focus on certain information, whilst the part not focused on is presupposed; here we have the first opposition, seen above, between FOCUS and PRESUPPOSITION.

[For further reading on this topic:

GUTIÉRREZ ORDOÑEZ, S. (1997): Temas, remas, focos y comentarios (Themes, rhemes, focus and comments), Madrid: Arco Libros.]

Together with these two concepts, which belong to the speaker's pragmatics because they depend on what the speakers/listeners know, there are others that are frequently mixed and confused in the literature.

- Danes, 1964: level of organisation in expression; in 1967 he proposed the distinction TOPIC/COMMENT and THEME/ RHEME (starting and developing point). The distinction did not become effective because it was considered that both axes are usually symmetric.
- Halliday, 1967: textual level
- Chomsky, 1970: focus/presupposition structure
- Chafe, 1976: known/new information

The theme/rheme or topic/comment oppositions places us in the area of textual pragmatics and we are dealing with the newness of the information: the theme is the subject of the information, that which is spoken about (sometimes supporting) and the comment is what is said about the theme (sometimes also contributory). The succession of themes and rhemes makes up the thematic progression of texts.

In the dialogue structure, interventions frequently show coherence with the earlier turns by accepting the themes of the earlier intervention; that is, if one speaker wishes to introduce a theme into the conversation, a chain of turns is necessary in which the first speaker makes a mention, the second accepts the proposal of the theme by some topicalisation mechanism (questions, expansion of the theme) and the first speaker again intervenes appropriately:

- Speaker A: mention
- Speaker B: topicalisation
- Speaker A: development

These structures are often altered in speakers with cerebral damage. For example,

- Brady, Mackenzie and Armstrong⁴(2003) indicate that speakers with a lesion in the right hemisphere present some problems with thematic coherence, specifically in maintaining the theme (they issue more unconnected turns, that is, not relevant, than those speakers without cerebral lesions).
- Perkins, Whitworth and Lesser⁵ (1998) refer to the frequency with which speakers with Alzheimer-type dementias break the coherent chain of themes and introduce new unrelated themes (**thematic escapes**).
- Our study on Williams Syndrome data from the Perla corpus (Gallardo 2007, 2008)⁶ concluded that these speakers present an impairment in the incorporation of Grice's Cooperation Principle and this leads to serious difficulties in topicalisation of external interventions. Their talkativeness and friendliness contrasts with the abundance of loose turns (they do not thematise the mentions of others) and the tendency to glossomania (preferred themes).

These informative impairments can affect abilities to:

- Introduce themes
- Change themes
- Maintain (develop) themes

and therefore these factors are normally included in the pragmatic evaluation tests.

[Complete these aspects on conversational theme by reading the set bibliography.]

⁴ Brady, Marian; Mackenzie, Catherine y Armstrong, Linda (2003): Topic use following right hemisphere brain lesions during three semi-structured conversational discourse samples, *Aphasiology*, 17:9, pp. 881-904.

⁵ Perkins, Lisa / Whitworth, Anne / Lesser, Ruth (1998): "Conversing in dementia: A conversation analytic approach", in M. Paradis (Ed.): *Pragmatics in Neurogenic Communication Disorders*, New York: Elsevier, pp. 33-53.

⁶ Gallardo Paúls, Beatriz (2007): *Pragmática para logopedas (Pragmatics for speech therapists)*, Cádiz: Publicaciones de la Universidad de Cádiz; (2008): "Habilidades lingüísticas pragmáticas en el Síndrome de Williams", *Revista de investigación*, in press.