

## ON SOME PROBLEMS OF SEQUENCING

With the development of Discourse Analysis, which is focused on the problems of tied, united utterance sequences, it became clear that the minimal unit of speech is the exchange. The latter consists of two interventions spoken by two different people, one following directly the other in time. It is common knowledge that there is a certain form of communicative reciprocity between the interventions of the exchange – the initiative (or summons) and the reaction (or answer). So, one of the main problems of Discourse Analysis is concerned with sequencing – how a conversation is managed so as to result in a holistic unity – a smooth and unified concatenation of utterances. In this article we shall touch upon some problems of sequencing, trying to reveal the role of various factors which help to maintain communicative success in the process of interaction.

It is generally believed that the process of verbal communication has a heterogeneous structure, comprising intralinguistic as well as extralinguistic components. The recognition of the extralinguistic nature of utterances revealed a number of pragmatic components in the communicative structure of speech acts – illocutionary force and perlocutionary effect, as well as interactional acts. Explorations in the field of Speech Act Theory brought to light the extralinguistic nature of tied stretches of utterances – discourse. Thus, the scope of linguistic concern expanded and discourse analysts focused on such aspects of human behaviour and mind that were traditionally considered to be irrelevant to language use.

Accordingly, it stands to reason that speech surpasses the bounds of linguistic nature of signs. It is a rule-governed form of social behaviour which is regulated by certain social rules, maxims, as well as sequencing rules. Seeking ways of explaining the rule-governed nature of spoken discourse, discourse analysts treated speech as a two-way process in which two interlocutors are equally involved in the process of communication, sending and receiving messages. These messages possess an essential distinction – they are associated with a certain communicative goal. Every verbal communication, in fact, exploits language as a system of expressive means which can be appropriate for a goal. Thus, the notion of goal is fundamental in the process of interaction.

Since people do not interact with each other without having any goals they want to achieve, any utterance or sequence of utterances in a discourse is a related action which is used to regulate certain situations. In view of all these facts, the exchange of verbal messages, in the normal course of events, cannot be pointless, purposeless, it is aimed at achieving the communicative goals of the interlocutors. Therefore, sequencing, i.e. utterance ties, can also be regarded as a technique of realizing communicative goals. In so far as speech is a directed form of linguistic behaviour and intends consistent response, it is natural that "each person in the process of linguistic interaction constructs utterances so that it is obvious that he or she has attended to the last utterance or sequence of utterances produced, and that the next utterance is placed with respect to the preceding ones"(Zamuner, 1981: 316).

The consistent nature of interaction is necessarily reflected upon sequencing - the ties, links which exist between the interrelated interventions of the speakers.

We assume that utterance ties present an important material for research. It should be noted that the problem of utterance linking is not new in linguistics. Much has been written about linguistic (structural, semantic, functional) and extralinguistic (intentional, interactional) ties of utterances in Textlinguistics, Discourse Analysis, as well as in Conversation Analysis (Paronyan, 2003). Anyhow, since these ties have mainly been treated individually so far, a complex outlook is required to assess the significance of utterance links in the process of discourse interpretation.

Since sequential ties are bridges between utterances which help to promote a smooth and felicitous interaction, we propose to call them Communicative Harmony Determinants. They are important features which facilitate the total interpretation of texts. With this in mind, we distinguish three aspects of sequential ties: Cohesion, Coherence, Relevance. In order to deal with this problem, it is helpful to introduce a distinction between these determinants. We shall look upon each of these determinants separately.

The first Communicative Harmony Determinant is Cohesion. It has been accepted that textual cohesion is a dynamic process of uniting clauses and bringing the flow of speakers' meaning into close relationship. In principle, cohesion is realized linguistically by devices and ties which are elements or units of language used to form larger text. Text linguists state that cohesion relies heavily on grammar and lexical devices and refers to those overt features

of a text which provide surface evidence for the unity and correctedness. Thus, according to R.Quirk, cohesion or sentence connection is realized through structural, semantic and lexical devices. Halliday distinguishes the following factors providing cohesion: deixis, reference, ellipsis, lexical cohesion (Quirk,1973, Halliday,1985).

So, as we can see, Cohesion presents formal links between clauses and this fact brings us strongly up against the question that has puzzled many linguists: what binds the utterances in the absence of formal links? While there is no doubt that cohesive devices create sequential harmony in discourse, uniting individual utterances into chunks of tied interventions, it is also true that cohesion markers have limitations, since we do not operate only with the literal output to our understanding. Thus, it appears that we understand the meaning of a linguistic message not only on the basis of the words and structure of the sentences used to convey the message. To solve this problem we therefore need to go beyond the domain of formal links and find out implicit means of utterance ties that provide adequate and felicitous sequencing rules. Thus, it has become fairly standard in Discourse Analysis to distinguish between cohesion and coherence.

It should be stated that the notion of coherence is complex and debatable, that is why it presents a great deal of difficulty to define. Currently more widespread is the notion that coherence is a cognitive category which gives unity to our mental interpretation of discourse. Thus, G.Yule treats the assumption of coherence as normal experience of individuals which is tied to the familiar and the expected: "that what is said or written will make sense in terms of their normal experience of things" (Yule, 1996).

Trying to elaborate the structure of discourse, G. Cook states that coherence is a quality of meaning unity, and purpose, a quality which cannot be explained by concentrating on the internal grammar of sentences. Another possible approach has been proposed by Olshtain, who assumes that coherence is not only cognitive, but also a socio-cultural quality "that makes a text conform to a consistent world view based on one's experience, culture and convention". (Olshtain,2003:718 )

However, what different approaches and interpretations of coherence have in common is the acknowledgement of the fact that the latter presents implicit utterance ties, connections which do not manifest formal, explicit links. These links are concerned mainly with the function of utterances and have to do

with the illocutionary level of speech acts. Thus, Brown and Yule treat coherence as a process of interpreting a speaker's or writer's intended meaning in producing discourse. Accordingly, they isolate three aspects of this process: computing the communicative function (how to take the message), using general socio-cultural knowledge (facts about the world) and determining the inferences to be made (Brown, 1983).

Trying to show how some utterances which are unconnected in formal terms and lack cohesion may form a coherent sequence, conversation analysts (ethnographers and ethnomethodologists) assume that the recognition of coherence or incoherence in conversational sequences is not based on a relationship between utterances, but "between the actions performed with those utterances" (Brown, 1983:226). Thus, in other words, it is the conventional structure of spoken interaction that provides sequential harmony in the absence of explicit cohesive ties. The linguists supporting this view treat conversational discourse as a form of social interaction and state that we can accept a sequence as a coherent discourse only by recognizing the action performed by these utterances. Thus, the aim of this type of analysis of conversational discourse is to identify the regularities of conversational structure by describing the ways in which participants take turns at speaking according to adjacency-pair formula, which means that what follows a question should be treated as an answer to that question. The admission of adjacency-pair formula captures an important aspect of how we assume that two formally unconnected utterances placed together form a coherent piece of discourse. Studies in discourse analysis have also revealed some kind of sequencing functions, some order in the way speech acts follow one another, a number of specific follow-up turns (Yule, 1996, Finigen, 1999). Accordingly, questions take answers, greetings are returned by greetings, invitations and requests by refusals, assessments by disagreement, pleas require offer, etc. Thus, as we can see, the function of utterances helps us to go further towards finding the problem and deciding what it is that makes stretches of discourse coherent and communicative. Hence, it is necessary to analyse the structure of discourse both in terms of surface relations of form and underlying relations of functions and acts.

Unlike the studies discussed above, which are concerned with utterance ties on the illocutionary level, W. Edmondson proposes to examine utterance ties on the interactional level, i.e. in the aspect of social behaviour. Treating the process of communication as a kind of human action, he interpretes the tied



stretches of talk in the light of social interaction carried out with the help of linguistic signs. Distinguishing between cohesion and coherence, W. Edmondson supposes that cohesion presents the linguistic – semantic and grammatical ties of the exchange and is not a sufficient condition for coherence. Coherence is displayed by the social actions done with the help of linguistic signs. Thus, coherent stretches of talk may present a combination of 'search for information – answer', 'assignment to carry out an action – agreement/disagreement', 'undertaking to do or not to do something – stating of attitude', etc. Coherence presents the fourth pragmalinguistic level – the interactional level and is inherent in tied stretches of talk only (Edmondson, 1981, Паронян, 2003).

It should be noted again that coherence is treated as a cognitive process in Pragmalinguistics. Therefore the second aspect of this process mentioned by Brown and Yule - using knowledge of the world - is also of particular importance in providing an adequate interpretation of harmoniously tied stretch of utterances - discourse. As is often the case, to activate a coherent information the reader or speaker activates background knowledge expected by the writer or speaker (Yule, 1996:85). In the process of interpreting a written text, the reader assesses his/her specific purpose for reading and then recruits his or her knowledge of the world, previous experience in reading, and familiarity with writing conventions and different types of genres to arrive at that degree of interpretation deemed necessary (Olshtain, 2003:718). In the process of decoding oral speech, the hearer relies on certain background knowledge (social world, mental world, physical world) to arrive at an adequate interpretation of the message heard.

I am also in agreement with Olshtain's statement that the knowledge we possess as users of language concerning social interaction via language is just one part of our general socio-cultural knowledge. Hence, it follows that coherence is not only a cognitive, but a socio-cultural entity. /1/ One of the things revealed by this consideration of coherence is the assumption that the interpretation of discourse is based to a large extent on the principle of analogy with what we have experienced in the past. M.Stubbs assumes that how we interpret discourse (and experience) appeals to stereotypic knowledge or fixed storage systems. /2/ Accordingly, treating coherence in terms of cognitive linguistics, it is necessary to distinguish between local coherence and global coherence which may be analyzed in terms of stereotypic scripts and goals.

Let us next consider the third aspect of coherence which concerns the role of inferences in the process of interaction. Inferences may be described as the process which the reader/hearer must go through to get from the literal meaning of what is written (or said) to what the writer/speaker intended to convey. Thus, we can say that coherence refers to textual relations which are inferred but not explicitly expressed. This means that much of the data require inferences on the reader's (or hearer's) part to arrive at an interpretation. Therefore, it is assumed that the relations between speech acts (such as complaint – excuse) may have to be inferred from context or other background nonlinguistic knowledge (Stubbs, 2003:306). To sum up, we can state that inferences are missing links which are necessary to make an explicit connection between utterances./3/

In progressing to the third determinant of sequential harmony, Relevance, it should be noted that the notion of relevance is extremely complicated and vexing. As we know, Relevance Theory, which is a branch of Cognitive Linguistics, focuses on problems of relevant usage of linguistic signs. It has to do with certain cognitive aspects of linguistic choice. The notion of relevance, as we know, was introduced into pragmalinguistic analyses by H. Grice in his famous Maxim of Relevance. Relevance is usually understood as a connection with what is happening, being talked. Thus, generally speaking, relevant intervention is the one which is related to the previous intervention. For example, 'question – answer' sequences are a prime example of adjacency pairing. It is expected that when a question is asked the next thing said will be a relevant answer, that is, an utterance which is connected with what is asked in the previous question. Therefore, it is necessary to differentiate between the thematic factor of communication (i.e. topic) and relevance. It should be stated that relevant remarks include actual information, the information that is asked in the question. Irrelevant remarks may be related to the theme of the previous remark but they do not focus on actual information. Hence, it goes without saying, that speaking on the topic does not provide sequential relevance. (Blakemore, 2003:101)

It should be stated that pragmalinguists do not often make a clear distinction between coherence and relevance. First of all, since relevance is related to discourse topic, it is fairly customary in conversation analysis to treat relevance as semantic coherence and coherence proper as pragmatic coherence. A group of linguists propose a functional approach to relevance and argue that

coherence should be defined in terms of relevance to a discourse topic. On this basis, Giora, for example, does not treat coherence in terms of local coherence relations between the segments of text. She states that we have intuitions about the way in which adjacent segments are related (Giora, 1996). In a relevance theoretic framework, proposed by Blakemore, the computation of coherence relations is considered to be unnecessary since they can be derived as a consequence of a hearer's search for relevance. Thus, coherence is seen as a property of an object external to human mind and is defined in terms of structural relations between subunits of that object. As for relevance, it is considered to be a property of a mentally represented interpretation of the evidence a communicator provides for the thoughts he/she intends to communicate (Blakemore, 2003:114).

I seem to differ, however, in my evaluation of relevance relations and coherence. First of all, I do not agree with the idea of interpreting coherence through relevance. Secondly, I do not think that coherence is an intuitive notion which is a consequence of a reader's or a hearer's search for relevance. Hence, I suppose that it would be more accurate to treat relevance as an implicit cognitive-functional means of linking utterances. It thus appears that relevance is an "invisible bridge" between two interventions which deals with adequate interpretation of actual information – the communicative focus of interaction.

In the following, I shall try to explain the reasons for distinguishing between the three aspects of sequential ties. As a case study of what the role of Sequential Harmony Determinants is in the process of interaction, let us analyse a few extracts taken from modern American literature.

GEORGE: Where is my little yum yum? Where's Martha?

NICK: She's making coffee ... in the kitchen.

(E. Albee, "Who is Afraid of Virginia Woolf", New York, 1966, p. 89)

As we can see, in this exchange the speaker asks for information concerning the locative parameters of the situation and gets it. All the three aspects of sequential harmony are satisfied. In the second intervention cohesion is realized with the help of person deixis, as well as lexico-grammatical cohesion. Coherence is realized through 'question – answer' sequence. Relevance requirements are also met in this exchange: the reacting intervention concerns the actual information of the communicative context. Thus, the three aspects of sequential ties produce a holistic effect, making the interaction harmonious and, naturally, felicitous. It goes without saying that in the exchange

discussed above we have a successful piece of talk. The communicative goal of the exchange is realized and the process of communication proceeds without any disagreement and inconsistency. We can state that the cooperative functioning of Sequential Harmony Determinants comes to prove that the speakers are willing to act in unison.

Anyhow, our analysis has also revealed cases when, despite the presence of all the Determinants, the process of interaction does not proceed quite smoothly. In the following exchange, as we shall see, the answer does not conform to the quest in full, that is why the process of interaction is "extended" beyond two tied interventions.

"What did he want to kill himself for?" "How should I know." "How did he do it?" "He hung himself with a rope." "Who cut him down?" "His niece." "Why did he do it?" "Fear for his soul." (E. Hemingway, *The Complete Short Stories*, New York, 1989, p.289).

As we can see, the inquiry concerns the causative parameters of the context. The answer which seems to be sequentially harmonious with the quest lacks adequate information. That is why the reacting intervention does not satisfy the speaker. He continues the process of interaction inquiring after some details concerning the agence and the parameters of the context. The conversation is discontinued when the communicative goal is fully realized: "For fear of soul".

Let us analyze an exchange in which an implicit utterance connection – implicature is involved in the process of sequencing.

SAM: What are you doing here at this hour? ALLEN: I have a room here.

(A. Miller, "Cheaters", London, 1970, p.33)

As we can see, the interventions of the exchange are both cohesive and coherent. As for Relevance Determinant, the question of the latter is unclear. The thing is that the inquiry concerns the patience of the action but the answer seems to be focused on the locative parameters of the situation. This might lead us to suppose that the answer is not related to the question, it is out of the focus of communication. But, as far as it contains an inference, a hint which is associated with the patience – it is sequentially harmonious. As soon as the first speaker understands the implication, he treats the answer as relevant and, therefore, connected with his question. So, as following our analysis, we can state that the communicative goal in this exchange is realized through interrelated interventions and, such being the case, we have a successful stretch of talk with sequentially marked ties.



In summary, the analysis of sequentially harmonious discourse units comes to prove that the communicative success of interaction depends on the ties along processing and producing linguistic units. Sequential ties guarantee a smooth and interrelated manner of production choice as well as successful interpretation of discourse.

#### NOTES

1. It is fair to admit that general knowledge about the world supports our interpretation not only of discourse but of practically every aspect of our experience.
2. There have been several attempts to provide conventional or stereotypic representations of 'knowledge of the world' as a basis for interpretation of discourse (scripts, scenarios, interactional formulas).
3. Another important type of implicit logical ties is carried out through implication.

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