

THE ROLE OF COHERENCE IN THE INTERPRETATION OF DISCOURSE

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Özet

Söylem çözümlemesi (Discourse Analysis), dilbilimin özellikle son yıllarda gelişmekte olan bir alanı olup, dilin yapısından çok kullanımıyla ilgili kuralları içermektedir. Bu alan, cümlelerin arka arkaya dizilişinden oluşan, belli bir bütünlüğe sahip, paragraf, karşılıklı konuşma, sohbet, iş görüşmesi gibi tüm yazılı ve sözlü metinleri incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. 'Söylem' (=discourse) kelimesiyle kastedilen şey, kendi içinde bir bütünlüğe sahip tüm yazılı ve sözlü metinlerdir. Bazı dilbilimciler, yazılı metinleri 'text'(metin)terimiyle ifade ederek bu konuda bir ayırım yapsalar da , birçoğu, 'discourse' terimiyle her iki tür dilbilimsel iletişim şeklini, yani hem yazılı hem de sözlü iletişimi kastetmektedir.

Söylem çözümlemesinin, dilbilgisi kurallarıyla ilgili tüm yapısal yönünü bağlaşıklık (=cohesion) tekniği ele alıp incelemektedir. Bir metnin bağlaşıklık (=cohesive) oluşu asla tek başına yeterli değildir. Onun kabul edilebilir olması için mutlaka bağdaşık (=coherent) olması gerekmektedir. Bu makalenin konusunu teşkil eden bağdaşıklik veya uyum(=coherence) ilkesi söylemde yer alan ifadeler arasındaki ilişkileri ve uyumu incelemeye dayalıdır. Makalede ifade edildiği gibi , birçok dilbilimci, bağdaşıklik veya uyum (coherence) ilkesinin aslında dilde değil de, insanların kendisinde mevcut olduğu, okudukları veya duydukları metinlere kişilerin kendilerinin anlam kazandırdığı, bunun da onların dünya bilgileri ve tecrübeleriyle yakından ilgili olduğu konusunda hemfikirdir. Makalede bu konuya ilişkin çok sayıda örnekler verilmiş olup, aynı zamanda, bir metnin bağdaşık/uyumlu (=coherent) olup olmamasının, okuyucu veya dinleyicinin onu doğru, geçerli, mantıklı ve kabul edilebilir bulup bulmamasına bağlı olduğu da ifade edilmiştir.

I. INTRODUCTION

In this paper, coherence, which is one of the discourse analysis techniques, will be defined in detail; views of some linguists who had studied on this area will be mentioned; also its role in the interpretation of discourse will be shown by giving a number of examples.

II. THE ROLE OF COHERENCE IN THE INTERPRETATION OF DISCOURSE

Coherence is the relationship which links the meanings of utterances in a discourse or of the sentences in a text. These links may be based on the speaker's shared knowledge. For example:

A: Could you give me a lift home?

B: Sorry, I'm visiting my sister.

As it is seen, there is no grammatical or lexical link between A's question and B's reply, but the exchange has coherence, because both A and B know that B's sister lives in the opposite direction to A's home. (Richards, 1992:61)

According to Yule (1985:106-7), the key to the concept of coherence is not something which exists in people. It is people who make 'sense' of what they read and hear. They try to arrive at an interpretation with their experiences. Coherence is certainly present in the interpretation of casual conversation. People are continually taking part in conversational interactions where a great deal of what is meant is not actually present in what is said. A famous example adapted from Widdowson (1978- in Yule) is as follows:

Nancy: That's the telephone. Ron:

I'm in the bath.

Nancy: O.K.

Although there are certainly no cohesive ties within this fragment of discourse, how do these people manage to make sense of what the other says? In fact, they use the information contained in the sentences expressed, but there must be something else involved in the interpretation. It has been suggested that exchanges of this type are best understood in terms of the conventional actions performed by the speakers in such interactions. It is possible to characterize the brief conversation in the following way:

Nancy requests Ron to perform an action.

Ron states reason why he cannot comply with request.

Nancy undertakes to perform the action.

Nunan (1993:61-2) states that Widdowson (1978) also suggests that we are able to recognize this text as coherent by creating a context and then identifying the functions that each utterance fulfils within that context. Most native speakers would create a domestic situational context in which the following functions are assigned to each other:

UTTERANCE	FUNCTION
A: That's the telephone.	- Request
B: I'm in the bath.	- Excuse
A: O.K.	- Acceptance of excuse

Finally, in Widdowson's example, it is claimed that coherence is achieved through perception of the functions being performed by each utterance. It is clear that language users must have a lot of knowledge of how conversational interaction works. This is not simply 'linguistic knowledge'.

De Beaugrande and Dressler(1981:3) point out that a text can be defined as a communicative occurrence which meets seven standards of textuality .If any of these standards is not considered to have been satisfied, the text will not be communicative. Hence, non-communicative texts are treated as non-texts. They put forward seven standards for a text to be communicative such as **cohesion, coherence, intentionality, acceptability, informativity, situationality and intertextuality**. According to them, cohesion and coherence are text-centered notions, designating operations directed at the text materials. But it is clear that coherence is not a mere feature of texts, but rather the outcome of cognitive processes among text users. Coherence can be illustrated particularly well by a group of relations subsumed under CAUSALITY. These relations concern the ways in which one situation or event affects the conditions for some other one.

e.g.' Jack fell down and broke his crown.'

In this example, the event of 'falling down' is the cause of the event of 'breaking', since it created the necessary conditions for the latter. A weaker type of causality applies to this example:

- **The Queen of Hearts, she made some tarts, all on a summer day.**
- **The Knave of Hearts, he stole those tarts , and took them quite away.**

Here, the Queen's action created the sufficient , but not necessary conditions for the knave's action. It made it possible, but not obligatory. This relation can be termed ENABLEMENT.

The conceptual relations above do not cover all kinds of causality. In a sample such as:

- **Jack shall have but a penny a day.**
- **Because he can't work any faster.**

Here the low pay is not actually caused or enabled by the slow working , but is a reasonable and predictable outcome. The term REASON can be used for the relation where an action follows as a rational response to some previous event.

Another way of looking at events or situations is their arrangement in TIME. Cause, enablement, and reason have forward directionality ; that is, the earlier event or situation causes, enables, or provides the reason for the latter one. Purpose has backward directionality ; that is , the latter event or situation is the purpose for the earlier one.

De Beaugrande and Dressler(1981:6)also emphasize that coherence already illustrates the nature of a science of texts as human activities. A text does not make sense by itself, but rather by the interaction of **TEXT - PRESENTED**

KNOWLEDGE with people's STORED KNOWLEDGE OF THE WORLD.

Chastain(1988:69) defines 'coherence' as a characteristic which refers to the sense of discourse . An extended discourse may be cohesive and its connectors may blend it into one unit, but if it lacks coherence , the listener will have difficulty interpreting the speaker's meaning. It is the listener who has the task of recreating the speaker's meaning, and he or she must rely heavily on his or her knowledge of relationships in the real world to communicate. Coherence is not a product of the grammar of the language; it is a product of the planning and logical organization of the speaker and the listener's ability to understand the speaker's logic. Coherence is not a feature of language ; it is a characteristic of the mind's organization of reality.

Nunan(1993:62-3) gives the following example for coherence: (A is addressing her husband who is clearing out a garden shed.)

A:Are you wearing gloves?

B:No.

A:What about the spiders?

B:They are not wearing gloves either.

Although there is no surface cohesion between A's two utterances , 'Are you wearing gloves?' , and 'What about the spiders?', B readily perceives that they are coherent in at least two ways:

- 1- **What about the spiders? You might get bitten , if you don't wear gloves.**
- 2- **What about the spiders, are they wearing gloves?**

If the subject of the second utterance happened to be human , the second interpretation would be the preferred one (for example, if the wife had said , 'What about the children?'). Here , it would be quite natural for the clause ' are they wearing gloves?' to be omitted.

However, given the non-human subject of the wife's second utterance , the second interpretation is highly improbable. It is possible to assume that the husband chooses the second interpretation for humorous effect. If the subject of the second utterance had been inanimate - for example, 'What about the nails?' - then the second interpretation would be merely silly.

Green(1989:101-2-3) points out that coherence is one consequence of the **COOPERATIVE PRINCIPLE**, and of the maxim '**Be relevant**' in particular, that Grice never discussed , is that it provides the basis for a natural account of the problem of the coherence of texts ; that is, of elucidating what it is that makes a plausible discourse, in contrast to which appears to be just a string of sentences related only by temporal or spatial order.

According to him, each sentence is intended to say something necessary, true, and relevant to accomplishing some objective in which the text producer and the intended audience are mutually interested. A coherent text is one where the interpreter can readily reconstruct the speaker's plan with reasonable certainty, by inferring the relations among the sentences, and their individual relations to the various subgoals in the inferred plan for the enterprise understood to be at hand.

In the example below, written by a professional writer, the nature of the connection between the first and the second sentence is not immediately obvious.

'One afternoon last fall I found myself unable to leave my car when I arrived at the grocery store. On 'All Things Considered' there was an excerpt from a series called 'Breakdown and Back', the story of a mental breakdown as experienced by one woman, Annie.'(Jeanie Cheeseman, 'Breakdown and Back' 1986-P.4 - in Green, 1989:104)

The writer of this paragraph has taken it for granted that the reader will recognize 'All Things Considered' as the name of a radio program and understand that the writer was listening to it over the radio. Still that is not enough to understand what the two sentences have to do each other. Asked about this paragraph, some respondents assume that the relation is just that of contemporaneousness of events, and that the two sentences together set the stage for a narration of what happened to the writer in the car. Others agree that the second sentence is relevant to the first in that it represents the proximate cause of the writer's inability to get out of the car, but vary widely in their interpretations of the ultimate cause. Some infer that the writer was paralyzed by the recall of the breakdown she herself experienced, some infer that the excerpts were so fascinating that the writer did not want to miss the rest. Others might infer that the writer was afraid to hear the rest of the program in the grocery store, and no doubt there still other plausible reasons one might infer.

Fairclough(1992:134-5) explains that the concept of 'coherence' is at the centre of most accounts of interpretation. Coherence is not a property of text, but a property which interpreters impose upon texts, with different interpreters (including the producer of the text) possibly generating different coherent readings of the same text. Nor should coherence be understood in an absolute, logical sense: a coherent text hangs together sufficiently well for present purposes as far as the interpreter is concerned, which does not preclude indeterminacies and ambivalence.

The point is, however, that a text only makes sense to someone who makes sense of it, someone who is able to infer those meaningful relations in the absence of explicit markers. But the particular way in which a coherent reading is generated for a text depends again upon the nature of the interpretative principles that are being drawn upon. Texts set up positions for interpreting subjects that are 'capable' of making sense of them and 'capable' of making the connections and inferences, in accordance with relevant interpretative principles, necessary to generate

coherent readings. These connections and inferences may rest upon assumptions of an ideological sort. For instance, what establishes the coherent link between the two sentences '**She is giving up her job next Wednesday. She is pregnant.**' is the assumption that women cease to work when they have children. In so far as interpreters take up these positions and automatically make these connections, they are being subjected by and to the text, and this is an important part of the ideological 'work' of texts and discourse in 'interpellating' subjects.

Meanwhile, Labov (1972:299 - in Schiffrin, 1994:291) locates coherence at a level of actions and reactions, but he does so in a way that adds social context to methods and concepts borrowed from linguistic analysis.

e.g. **A: Are you going to work tomorrow? B: I am on jury duty.**

Brown and Yule (1983:223) defines coherence like this:

'One of the pervasive illusions which persists in the analysis of language is that we understand the meaning of a linguistic message solely on the basis of the words and structure of the sentence(s) used to convey that message. We certainly rely on the syntactic structure and lexical items used in a linguistic message to arrive at an interpretation, but it is a mistake to think that we operate only with this literal input to our understanding. We can recognise; for example, when a writer has produced a perfectly grammatical sentence from which we can derive a literal interpretation, but which we could not claim to have understood, simply because we need more information.' In the following extract, the first sentence of a novel may provide an illustration of this point:

'Within five minutes, or ten minutes, no more than that, three of the others had called her on the telephone to ask if she had heard that something had happened out there.'

(Tom Wolfe, *The Right Stuff*, Bantam Books, 1981)

Other examples taken from Brown and Yule (1983:226-7-8) are as follows:

A doctor talking to a schizophrenic patient:

A: What's your name?

B: Well, let's say you might have thought you had something from before, but you haven't got it any more.

A: I'm going to call you Dean.

Labov (1970 - in Brown and Yule, 1983) states 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.'

Another example quoted in Brown and Levinson (1978:63) is used to show that the assumption of rationality on B's part leads us to assume that he is providing an answer to the question asked, and so on to the conclusion that the time is past 11 a.m. :

A: What time is it? B: Well, the postman's been already.

The next example is taken from Widdowson(1979:96) and illustrates a coherent piece of conversational discourse which exhibits no cohesive links between the two sentences involved:

At Can you go to Edinburgh tomorrow? B: B.E.A. pilots are on strike.

Widdowson claims that B's reply is to be taken as a negative answer to the question, because the strike will prevent the speaker flying to Edinburgh.

The following example provided by Enkvist(1978:110-11 - in Brown and Yule, 1983:197) makes clear that all cohesive devices naturally play an important role to construct texts, but they, on their own, are not sufficient to establish coherence in all given sequences of sentences:

'I bought a Ford. A car in which President Wilson rode down the Champs Elysees was black. Black English has been widely discussed. The discussions between the presidents ended last week. A week has seven days. Every day I feed my cat. Cats have four legs. The cat is on the mat. Mat has three letters.'

Of course, the cohesive ties lead the reader or hearer to a coherent interpretation of what he/she has read or heard. In the example above, because of the successive use of 'days-everyday', 'my cat- cats', 'mat-mat'...etc. there is a semblance of cohesion. But it is obvious that this is not a unified coherent text at all. That's, although this is an example of a highly cohesive text, it is incoherent.

Von Dijk(1985:109-10) states that two large classes of semantic coherence can be distinguished: conditional coherence and functional coherence. A sequence of propositions is conditionally coherent if it denotes a sequence of conditionally related facts, such as causes and consequences, whereas a sequence of propositions is functionally coherent if the respective propositions have themselves a semantic function defined in terms of the relation with previous propositions. Thus, a proposition may function as a specification, explanation, example, comparison, contrast or generalization with respect to a previous proposition.

The following discourses are conditionally coherent:

- 1) a. Next **month we will be in Berkeley,**
b. **We will be staying with friends.**
- 2) a. **This morning I had a toothache,**
b. **I went to the dentist.**
- 3) a. **We went to an expensive restaurant.**
b. **John ordered trout with almonds.**

But this one is functionally coherent:

- a) **They have a big house on the hill,**

b. It has at least ten rooms.

Von Dijk (85:110) also points out that coherence is provided not only by the ordering of sentences, but also by their meaning and reference. Thus, we do not in general have sequences like this:

a. We went to an expensive restaurant,

b. John ordered a big Chevrolet.

Although -b- is a meaningful sentence in isolation, it does not meaningfully relate to the previous sentence if it is interpreted as an action performed at the restaurant. Our world knowledge about eating in restaurants tells us that ordering a car is not a normal thing to do in restaurants. But the meaningfulness of a discourse also depends on what we assume to be the normalcy of the facts, episode, or situation described. In other words, understanding a discourse presupposes understanding the world. For a discourse like this one, it can be thought that John is crazy or just trying to be funny. It (that's -b-) could also be interpreted as the first sentence of a sequence that, as a whole, specifies the restaurant event: **John ordered a car (e.g. a taxi) to take us to the restaurant.**

As Von Dijk (1985:112) remarked, coherence always should be defined in terms of full propositions and the facts they denote, and coherence is relative to the world knowledge of speaker or hearer.

In addition to this kind of local coherence, which is defined as relations between sentences of a textual sequence, Von Dijk (1981:268) also defines 'GLOBAL COHERENCE'. Global coherence is defined in terms of whole sets of sentences for the discourse as a whole. Global coherence is also known in more intuitive terms, as the 'theme', 'idea', 'gist' of a discourse or a passage of the discourse. At the same time, the macrostructure of a discourse defines its global coherence. Without such a global coherence, there would be no overall control upon the local connections and continuations. Sentences might be connected appropriately according to the given local coherence criteria, but the sequence would simply go astray without some constraint on what it should be about globally.

e.g. This morning I had a toothache.

I went to the dentist.

The dentist has a big car.

The car was bought in New York.

New York has had serious financial troubles.

The facts above may be related locally, but they are not related to one central issue or topic.

The coherence of a text is a result of the interaction between knowledge presented in the text and the reader's own knowledge and experience of the world,

the latter being influenced by a variety of factors such as age, sex, race, nationality, education, occupation, and political and religious affiliations. Charolles(1983- in Baker, 1992:222) suggests that a reader may see a certain continuity of sense between parts of an utterance and still fail to understand it fully.If the following stretch of language is examined:

e.g. — I went to the cinema.

_ The beer was good.

It is seen that if decontextualized , this is a perfectly coherent piece of language. Anyone who hears or reads it will reach the following interpretations: 'the speaker says that s/he went to the cinema , drank beer at the cinema , and that the beer in question was good.' Meanwhile, we naturally provide the necessary links to render the discourse coherent. In fact, there is nothing in the above utterance which tells us explicitly that the speaker drank the beer or did so at the cinema. Charolles calls this kind of minimal coherence SUPPLEMENTAL COHERENCE.He suggests that there is another kind of coherence, which he calls EXPLANATORY COHERENCE. This not only establishes continuity of senses , but unlike supplemental coherence, also justifies it.

Charolles(1983:93 - Baker, 1992:223) expresses the difference between supplemental interpretations and explanatory interpretations in his own words:

'The former never lead to the explication of a thematic continuity(they indicate that an element is repeated from one segment to another); whereas the latter justify this continuity (they lead to the manifestation of the reason why a certain thing is said supplementally about an element.)'

Explanatory coherence is achieved when, given the right context and the necessary knowledge of setting and participants. One can reach an interpretation such as this: **the speaker says s/he went to the cinema. The film s/he saw was bad - so bad that the only good thing s/he can find to say about it is that the beer s/he drank there was good.**

m. CONCLUSION

After we have examined many different views and definitions which have been put forward by many linguists on 'COHERENCE' and the importance of coherence in the interpretation of discourse , as a final remark , we can say that in addition to our knowledge of sentential structure, we also have a knowledge of other standard formats in which information is conveyed. In other words, whether a text is judged as coherent or not depends on whether the reader or listener finds the presented version real, believable, homogeneous, or relevant. Also, interpreting discourse and establishing coherence is a matter of readers and listeners using their linguistic knowledge to relate the discourse world to people, objects, events, and states of affairs beyond the text itself. Finally, what the textual record means is determined by our interpretation of what the producer intended it to mean.

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