

Lecture 2: Discourse and Grammar

Traditionally, grammar refers to the set of rules that govern the way sentences are formed using different patterns and structures. Emphasis is put on the well-formedness of the resultant constructed items i.e. sentences which express a complete idea. There are certain rules to be followed so that the speaker or writer produces correct sentences or utterances. For example, in English a sentence begins with a subject which must have a finite verb then an object or complement. In the interrogative form, however, we make subject-verb inversion. A good example of this:

- He is ready for the exam.
- Is he ready for the exam?
- In discourse analysis, 'you are ready for the exam?' can be regarded as a question that needs an answer even if the structure of the sentence is not that of a question.

When we try to account for discourse grammar, we need to bear in mind that a good mastery of English grammar is very essential for communication on the part of the learner. In this lecture, some common terms will be used such as **clause, pronoun, adverbial, conjunction** in addition to other **new terms: theme, rheme, reference, anaphoric**. The learner will get familiar with these new terms through relating them to the earlier, more common ones. This, on part, will help make the connection between **grammar** and **discourse**. "We shall be looking at "what discourse analysts can tell us about contextualised uses of structures and grammatical items, and considering whether grammar teaching needs to broaden or shift its orientations to cover significant areas at present under-represented in grammar teaching." McCarthy (1991:34). In fact, any learner of a foreign language should develop a good command of grammar through producing well-formed clauses and sentences. Additionally, he/she should move to a higher level of competency which is structuring larger units of discourse.

Grammatical cohesion and Textuality:

When speakers and writers communicate their ideas, they tend to establish **grammatical links** between the sentences or utterances they produce. These links are done through: reference, ellipsis/substitution, and conjunction.

1.1.Reference

In fact, there are two different views regarding reference. According to Lyons words refer to things. This traditional linguistic view excludes the role of the speaker or writer. Consider the following example:

John is a teacher. He is thirty five. He lives in France.

The pronoun he refers to John.

More recently, however, Lyons indicated that people refer to things through words because words cannot refer to things by themselves. It is this view that a research analyst should have. This can be supported by Strawson's (1950) claiming that "referring" is something an expression

does. It is something that someone can use an expression to do'. Therefore, from a discourse analyst viewpoint it is the speaker or the writer who refers to entities in the world by means of words. Brown and Yule (1983)

Now, reconsider the previous example: John is a teacher. He is thirty five.

From a discourse analyst stance, it is the writer who used “**John** and **he**” to refer to the same person.

In English, the pronouns (he, she, it, him, his, they, etc) in addition to demonstrative pronouns (this, that, these, those) and the article “the” are all reference items.

1.1.1. Anaphoric Reference: refers to the act of using a word generally a pronoun to refer to something **mentioned earlier** in this text. according to McCarthy:

Exercises which involve looking back in texts to find the referent of, for example, a pronoun, have long been common in first and second language teaching and testing. Usually items such as he/she or them can be decoded without major difficulty; other items such as it and this may be more troublesome because of their ability to refer to longer stretches of text and diffuse propositions not necessarily paraphrasable by any direct quotation from the text. (1999: 36). He provided the following example:

“It rained day and night for two weeks. The basement flooded and everything was under water. It spoilt all our calculations.” ibid

He maintained, “it” seems to mean the events of two weeks or “the fact that it rained and flooded”. ibid

1.1.2. Cataphoric Reference: refers to the act of using a word generally a pronoun to refer to something that **will be mentioned later** in this text.

Consider the following example:

She claims Leo Tolstoy as a distant cousin. Her grandfather was Alexei Tolstoy - the famous 'Red Count' who sided with Lenin's revolutionaries. Now, Tatyana Tolstaya has put pen to paper, in her case to demonstrate that someone from the family can write compactly. In her stories of ten to twelve typewritten pages, 'I somehow try to show the whole life of a **person** from birth to death,' she says.

(Newsweek, 21 September 1987: 12) cited in McCarthy(1991. 41-2)

According to McCarthy, cataphoric reference helps “to engage and hold the reader's attention with a 'read on and find out' message. In news stories and in literature, examples of cataphoric reference are often found in the opening sentences of the text.”(1999. 42)

1.2. Theme and Rheme

Developed by Michael Halliday (systemic functional linguistics), the terms theme and rheme describe the organization of information within an utterance or sentence. They tend to specify the

way in which a sentence is related to what has already been said or known .i.e. theme and what is new or informative which represents (rheme)

1.2.1. Theme

In English, the word theme is used to refer to the first part of a clause which is sometimes the subject. In other times, however, the theme might not be the subject. What matters is that the theme is the starting point in a clause, or what the sentence is about.

Example:

The new concepts were too difficult to understand.

Theme: The new concepts

1.2.2. Rheme

The rheme refers to the part of the clause that comes after the theme. It provides new information about the theme

It adds to the meaning.

Example:

The new concepts **were too difficult to understand.**

Rheme: were too difficult to understand.

Importance of Theme and Rheme

Understanding theme and rheme helps in:

Academic writing: clear and logical structuring of information.

Teaching: teaching learners the right organization of ideas.

Analysis of texts: to observe the shift of emphasis in discourse.