

Study of English Discourse Interpretation Strategies from the Perspective of Discourse Interpretation

Chen Zhen^{1, a}

¹College of Humanities and Social Sciences, Heilongjiang Bayi Agricultural University, Daqing, Heilongjiang 163319, China.

^azhenchen20032002@aliyun.com

Abstract

In the study of psycholinguistics, scholars hold that discourse interpretation is the advanced stage of the study and the ultimate goal of the study of language interpretation. This paper analyzes the structure of English discourse from the perspective of local coherence and global coherence of discourse interpretation. On the basis of this, the paper puts forward some strategies to realize the effective interpretation of English discourse.

Keywords

Discourse interpretation, local coherence, global coherence, English discourse.

1. INTRODUCTION

Psycholinguistics is an interdisciplinary field that draws on psychology and related disciplines to study language processes (Gui 2000). In our daily life, we need to process various kinds of discourses, such as stories, reports, speeches, etc. Each form of discourse has its own characteristics. However, according to the study of psycholinguistics, different types of discourse have some common attributes. Sentences in a discourse are coherent if they are connected to each other, and these relationships exist at the local and global level. The understanding of discourse is closely related to these local and global relationships. This paper will analyze the structure of English discourse from the perspective of discourse interpretation, so as to realize the effective reading of English discourse.

2. LOCAL COHERENCE AND GLOBAL COHERENCE IN DISCOURSE INTERPRETATION

People habitually hold that a combination of meaningful sentences can make up the discourse. In fact, however, a group of meaningful sentences may be meaningless because of the random connection, and this kind of discourse will make it difficult for readers or listeners to understand.

According to the research of scholars (Barlet 1932, Bausard & Johnson 1972), the difficulty of understanding a passage may be based on two reasons: (1) Although readers can understand each sentence, they cannot establish the connection and local coherence between sentences. (2) Although there are connections between sentences, readers don't know what the whole passage is talking about and what the topic is, so they don't have the global coherence. The process of discourse interpretation is the process by which the readers establish the global coherence of discourse in the brain and therefore find out the subject of discourse. Building global coherence is based on building local coherence. Therefore, local coherence and global coherence are the key issues of discourse interpretation (Carroll, 2000). These two kinds of coherence and the

strategies of discourse interpretation based on these coherence are analyzed in detail in the following, and taking English discourse as an example, the practicality of these strategies are discussed.

3. LOCAL COHERENCE AND DISCOURSE INTERPRETATION STRATEGIES

3.1. Cohesion in Local Coherence

At the local level, if a continuous sentence has a semantic relationship, the discourse is coherent. Halliday and Hasan (1976) call the core concept a cohesion. They defined the cohesion as the possibilities used to connect what was mentioned earlier. They look into English as an object and find that there are many categories of English cohesion. There are some examples (the italicized words) relative to the local coherence in the following table (see table 3.1).

Table 1. Examples (the italicized words) relative to the local coherence

Categories	Example
Anaphoric Reference Pronoun	The woman lost track of her little boy at mall. She became very worried.
Determiner Comparative Words	That was the worst exam I had all term. It's the same band that we heard last week.
Substitution Ellipsis Conjunction Lexicon	My computer is too slow. I need to get a fast one. I wish I had more talent. My sister has a lot more than I do. Melissa flunked out of school, so she is looking for a job.
Repetition of meaning	I saw a boy win the spelling bee. The boy was delighted afterwards.
Synonym	I saw a boy win the spelling bee. The lad was delighted afterwards.
Hyponym	I saw a boy win the spelling bee. The child was delighted afterwards.

(Source: Cohesion in English, by M.A.K. Halliday & R. Hasan, Longman, 1976)

In all of the above examples, connection refers to the association of certain current words with those that have emerged above, which is called anaphoric reference (Halliday & Hasan 1976). When a word is used to point to what has been described before, this word is called an anaphor and the word used before is called the antecedent. Sometimes one word is used to point to the information in the following part, then the word is called a cataphor.

3.2. Given / New Strategy

Psychological linguists Clark and Clark (1977) extend their theory of anaphora. In their study, the given information means the readers already knows or can find out while the new information refers to the concepts that the reader is not yet familiar with. Based on this notion, they propose a sentence integration model called given/new strategy. According to this strategy,

the sentence interpretation process in the discourse consists of three sub-processes: (1) Identify the given and new information in the current sentence. (2) Find out the antecedents of the given information. (3) Connect the new information to the memory. Then readers can interpret sentences and discourse in different ways according to the characteristics of the target sentences and the given sentence. Three methods are delivered in the following based on the sub-processes in discourse interpreting.

Method (1): The simplest case is that the given information in the target sentence matches directly with the antecedents of another sentence in the context. This allows readers to interpret the target sentence using a direct matching method.

Method (2): In some cases, the given information does not have a direct antecedent, but we can still connect the sentences. This requires bridging the context with what is already known in the brain to interpret the discourse.

Method (3): When the target sentence points to the person or object mentioned before, but is not in the foreground, the reader needs to restore the information that matches the target information. Then it's needed to use the method of retrieving the given information. Studies have shown that this approach increases the time of interpreting. Therefore, it is time-consuming and difficult to interpret discourse with such a sentence relationship.

3.3. Interpreting Strategies based on Local Coherence in Discourse and its Application in English Discourse Interpretation

On the basis of the above conclusion, it can be seen that an intrinsic feature of discourse is the overlap of sentence contents and the introduction of new information with given information. At the beginning of discourse, almost everything is new, but once introduced, the newly defined concept is linked to the later concept. Therefore, when the readers read and interpret the discourse the readers can benefit from the strategies of looking directly for the relation of the concept in the discourse which include:

Pay close attention to the anaphoric reference and Notice where inferences have to be made.

Use given information to connect with the following to convert suspected the new information into the given information. The methods available here are the direct matching method, the bridging method and the method for restoring the new information as mentioned above

Therefore, these two strategies can be used to guide the discourse interpretation to make a breakthrough in the local coherence of the discourse. First, we can build a network of interrelated propositions in which each concept can serve as a clue to the extraction of other concepts; second, even if the readers don't have the information to infer, finding the connection between propositions deepens the level of processing and thus promotes the preservation of individual propositions; thirdly, the propositions are related to each other, so they will promote the readers to construct a hierarchical memory structure, which can be used to organize the recollection and summary of the discourse.

The following is an example of a New York Times article entitled Married With Bankruptcy to analyze the application of these two strategies.

Pay close attention to the anaphoric reference.

Example 1: 1) In times of economic crisis, Americans turn to their families for support. 2) If the Great Depression is any guide, we may see a drop in our skyhigh divorce rate. 3) But this won't necessarily represent an increase in happy marriages. 4) In the long run, the Depression weakened American families, and the current crisis will probably do the same.

This is the first paragraph of the passage. In order to interpret the discourse, several obvious anaphoric references should be paid attention to and find the antecedents related to anaphors. “But” in Sentence 3) is the conjunction in the anaphors and “this” is the indicator in the anaphors; “the same” in Sentence 4) is the comparative word in the anaphors. Based on these three anaphors, it can be clearly inferred that there is a transition at the beginning of sentence 3), then it can be found that “this” refers to “a drop in our skyhigh divorce rate”; “the same” in Sentence 4) refers to “weakened American families”. By figuring out these references, readers can catch on to the idea that the economic crisis will reduce the divorce rate, but after a long time, the relationship will still be broken down. If readers doesn’t find the anaphoric antecedents of these words very well, such as referring “this” in Sentence (3) to “our skyhigh divorce rate”, then the interpretation will produce ambiguities and errors.

Note the cohesion between the given information and the following part of the passage.

Example 2: 5) We tend to think of the Depression as a time when families pulled together to survive huge job losses. 6) By 1932, when nearly one-quarter of the workforce was unemployed, the divorce rate had declined by around 25% from 1929. 7) But this doesn't mean people were suddenly happier with their marriages. 8) Rather, with incomes decreasing and insecure jobs, unhappy couples often couldn't afford to divorce. They feared neither spouse could manage alone.

Example 2 is the second paragraph of the passage. The relationship between Sentence 6) and Sentence 5) can be interpreted by means of direct matching. In Sentence 5) the author mentions that during the Great Depression, people will come together to survive when they lose their jobs. On the basis of the given information, it can be inferred that “the workforce was unemployed” in Sentence 6) refers to the economic situation in the Great Depression. The interpretation of Sentence 7) needs the method of bridging. “The divorce rate had declined by around 25% from 1929” mentioned in Sentence 6) reminds the readers that the happiness of the couple results in the “drop in our skyhigh divorce rate”, which is the given information that was left in readers’ minds in the past, not from the original discourse but based on life experience. The readers need to bridge the given information in order to interpret the expression “this doesn't t mean people were suddenly happier with their marriages” in Sentence 7).

4. SCHEMA OF GLOBAL COHERENCE AND DISCOURSE INTERPRETATION STRATEGIES

The basic definition of global coherence is that all the sentences in the discourse are related to a topic, but the actual structure of the discourse is much more complicated than that. If the discourse has a topic, it is much easier to interpret. The reason is that the topic can often provide a suitable schema for the reader. Schema is a structure in semantic memory that defines the general desired arrangement of a group of information (Carroll 2000). In psycholinguistics, the concept of schema is not a new concept. Bartlett (1932) talks about schema when he refers to the recollection of stories in his earlier book. Bartlett argues that memory is not a process of rote memorization or reproduction, but a process of preserving the essentials of events (that is, schema) and reconstructing details based on the general impression.

4.1. Content Schema

Psychologists have done a lot of research on schema. Here are some studies on schemas: Bartlett (1932) asks some British college students to read the folktales of the Eskimo people. The study finds that the subjects had difficulty interpreting the stories, and they tends to modify many details in their recollections. This is mainly due to their lack of schemas about the Eskimo people. Studies have shown that when people lack schemas that fits the unfolding story, it can be difficult to interpret and remember because they can hardly interpret the meaning of the

events described. Moreover, a series of studies by Dooling et al (1974) and Bransford & Johnson (1973) confirm that when the paragraph is so vague that it is impossible for people to decide what the correct schema is, both understanding and memory are poor. Therefore, it can be known that the overall interpretation of the discourse needs a clear and appropriate schema, and the schema is needed to be activated in due course.

These studies illustrate the guiding function of schemata in discourse processing. Graphical schemas in understanding clearly play a powerful organizational role in recall. Furthermore, any information that plays a central role in schemas can be well remembered, but other details can be restored after changing angles, but are easily lost. In conclusion, the evidence that schema influences discourse processing is obvious.

4.2. Structural Schema—Genre

The schemas mentioned above are based on content, and it also can be inferred that different forms of discourse have different schemas (Dong 2005). Genre is a kind of discourse with its own unique structure. such as speeches, comments, plays and so on. The reason why genre is important is that it tells people how the message will be arranged in the discourse (Tian 2009).

One of the most examined genres in discourse research is the narrative discourse (stories). Contemporary researchers such as Mandler&Johnson (1977) sum up the schema of narrative discourse as story grammar. They argue that story grammar is used to mark a typical, expected arrangement of events in a story. Story grammar sees the story as consisting of a situation, one or more plots, and an ending. This is the basic structural schema for understanding narrative discourse.

Another genre is the expository discourse. This type of discourse is common when people read textbooks or listen to lectures. The focus of this type of discourse is on presenting information in an organized, logical manner.

The common genre in English discourse is the argumentative discourse. It is generally believed that the basic structure of argumentative discourse is to put forward views, give supporting arguments and draw conclusions.

4.3. Interpreting Strategies Based on Global Coherence in Discourse and its Application in English Discourse Interpretation

Based on the above discourse coherence theory, the importance of content schema and structural schema (genre) to discourse interpretation have been discussed. Therefore, the following strategies can be concluded to enhance discourse interpretation:

Establish the whole structure and induce the correct content schema successfully.

Identify the genre of the discourse and read according to the corresponding structural schema to make the interpreting activity fit with the detection.

The following are two examples, one of which is the above mentioned Example 2. The other one is one of the reading comprehensions in an English proficiency test. They are used to analyze the application of these two strategies based on the global coherence.

Example 2: In times of economic crisis, Americans turn to their families for support. If the Great Depression is any guide, we may see a drop in our skyhigh divorce rate. But this won't necessarily represent an increase in happy marriages. In the long run, the Depression weakened American families, and the current crisis will probably do the same.

The first paragraph of the passage (Example 2) refers to an obvious uppercase word "Great Depression", when the reader has the background information about the Great Depression of the United States from 1929 to 1945 and extracts relevant schemas, the reader will be able to quickly interpret the situation during the Great Depression and establish the overall structure

of the passage so that the whole passage can be read easily. At the same time, according to the topic of marriage and divorce, readers should also activate the schema of marriage rather than the schema of worker unemployment. The activation of the former is beneficial to the continued interpretation of the discourse, while the activation of the latter will mislead the continued interpretation of the discourse.

Example 3: It's an annual argument. Do we or do we not go on holiday? My partner says no because the boiler could go, or the roof fall off, and we have no savings to save us. I say that you only live once and we work hard and what's the point if you can't go on holiday. The joy of a recession means no argument next year – we just won't go.

Example 3 is the first paragraph of this reading comprehension. It can be seen from the first paragraph of the passage that this is an argumentative article. Therefore, readers should extract the schemas related to the argumentative genre when we read, that is, the discussion should be divided into several main parts to put forward the viewpoint, give the supporting argument, draw the conclusion, rather than extract the structure schema of the narrative or narrative discourse.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the two kinds of basic coherence - local coherence and global coherence—have been discussed from the perspective of discourse interpretation, and then conclude several strategies suitable for discourse interpretation by analyzing local coherence and global coherence respectively.

The following strategies can be applied based on the local coherence of discourse:

- (1) Pay close attention to the anaphoric reference.
- (2) Note the cohesion between the given information and the following part of the passage.

The following strategies can be applied based on the global coherence theory of discourse:

- (3) Establish the whole structure and induce the correct content schema successfully.
- (4) Identify the genre of the discourse and read according to the corresponding structural schema to make the interpreting activity appropriate with the detection.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work was supported by The Key Foundation Project of Heilongjiang Province Education and Science “13th Five-Year Plan” Record Project in 2019—Study on the Reform of Business English Curriculum Model in Local Universities under the Background of “New Liberal Arts Education”(GJC1319069).

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