

ANALYZING AN ORAL NARRATIVE USING DISCOURSE ANALYSIS TOOLS

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Abstract

Discourse analysis tools are important for language teachers as applied linguistics has always taken elements from different fields of study. To analyze a spoken text we have to divide it into its idea units. Identifying-classifying idea units are included, (1) organizational pattern of oral texts; (2) formulaic expressions; (3) use of single adjectives; (4) subordination; (5) intonation; (6) center of interest; and (7) perturbations of oral narrative. Oral narratives are composed of chronological elements such as “abstract, orientation, and resolution”. The writer used transcript of oral text to be analyzed.

INTRODUCTION

English is taught from junior high school up to university that is known as tertiary level as a compulsory subject. This means that the students have had opportunities to learn English for many years and some still beyond informal classes, but they still perform low ability in analyzing it. Some researchers have found that English students who dedicated much time for English could not analyze English discourse as well as expected. It means that students' learning outcome is still considered as unsuccessful teaching of English in Indonesia.

In this case, it is important to discuss the practical aspect of discourse. The practical aspect of discourse will make us competent enough to pick up some examples of discourse from the real life around us and analyze systematically and scientifically. We have, of course, to apply the theoretical principles we have learned from the theoretical treatment of discourse.

The practical experiences that stand on the background of their theoretical basis will become very significant for us because in this special mode of human interaction, we must need to be comprehended perfectly when we communicate with our fellow native speaker of foreign counterparts. Also we must need to catch clearly and correctly when somebody means something to us with his utterance or discourse.

English teachers have many handicaps. One of them is the students' low ability in English discourse analysis. It means that mastery of English discourse analysis need much time to

practice it. Realizing such condition in English class, English teachers should be more creatively look for the best way for communicative activities that urge and motivate the students to improve their ability to master English discourse.

We are not supposed to forget our prospective profession. In this sphere, a touch from the concept of discourse in the study of language to language teaching-learning processes is very significant. This is why a discussion on this writing becomes inevitable. A short and compact deal with it is organized a bit early.

Language is a system of sign (Chaer, 1994). The key word in this identification is the term sign. A sign is understood as something that stands for something. The first something is the formal aspects of the sign, whereas the second one is the meaning aspect.

The professional English teacher has to possess the adequacy of system of signs competence in English. He/she should be able to use the result of linguistic studies into the language teaching models. Some of the results of linguistic studies talk about English discourse analysis, so the English teacher has to possess the adequacy of English discourse analysis.

In this case, it is important to consider the formal aspect to signs. The formal aspect is physical so that we will have to use our sensory to sense it. We use our eyes if it is visual, our ears if additive, our feelings if tactile, and our nose if olfactory.

It is also important to consider the meaning aspect of signs. The meaning aspect is psychological. It is an image of a thing, or a state, or an activity that underlies the formal aspect. It is also social in the sense that the relation between the formal aspect and its underlying meaning is determined by agreement from the society.

In linguistics studies we study on phonemes, syllables, morphemes, allomorph, lexicons, words, phrases, clauses, sentences and discourse. They are related to the cases of discourse analysis. The proficiency of discourse analysis guarantees to produce sentences in speaking and writing.

Based on the description above, the writer wants to carry out a study entitled Analyzing an Oral Narrative Using Discourse Analysis Tools.

OBJECTIVES

- a. To show the importance of analyzing an oral narrative using discourse analysis tools in a classroom.
- b. To demonstrate how DA can be used in order to analyze an oral narrative recorded from a native speaker of English.
- c. Authentic spoken texts come from real-life
- d. Modified spoken texts have been modified to achieve some kind of language learning.

THE NOTION OF NARRATIVE

Social scientists have seldom considered definitions of narrative (cf. Brockmeier and Harré1991). Many scholars simply repeat Aristotle's characterization of a good tragedy having a beginning, middle, and end. For open, conversational or artistic narratives this is a far too compelling formula, emphasizing the clear sequence of events; on the other hand the terms are far too broad to reveal anything fundamental in the nature of what narratives actually do.

Smith (1981, 228) offers a useful, rhetorically oriented definition: "Someone telling someone else that something happened". With a slight revision we can also include sensitivity to the context: "Somebody telling somebody else on some occasion and for some purpose(s) that something happened" (Phelan 2005b, 18). The next step taken in this chapter is to suggest that one can also turn the term "somebody" into the plural form, making shared teller ship visible (Ochs and Capps, 2001).

Cultural studies may be criticized for two confusing ways of discussing narrative. In the first case, all kinds of interview talk are understood as narrative, narration or story. In such manner, the whole term of narrative is itself at risk of becoming redundant. Ordinary talk may as well include different genres of speech such as argumentation, instruction, and narration (Fludernik, 2000). In the second case, narrative is a substitute for a general assumption, theory, or ideological stance without temporal organization (Rimmon-Kenan 2006). Clive Seale, for example, suggests a far broader notion of narrative:

I understand narratives to be constructed through many things, including acts of consumption, for example, which can be made symbolically to tell stories about tastes, relationships (whether real or desired) or social standing. (Seale 2000, 37).

Seale points out convincingly how narrativity and narrative understanding are not something that only accounts for social action in retrospect. He also rejects, in a useful way, the

too narrow textualist ways of understanding narrative and opens new areas for narrative analysis. Narrativity is woven into acting and planning in ways discussed more thoroughly a moment later. But yet, in order to ward off the tendency of “narrative imperialism”, the elegant solution suggested by Mari-Laure Ryan might be more sustainable:

The narrative potential of life can be accounted for by making a distinction between ‘being a narrative’, and ‘possessing narrativity’. (Ryan 2005, 347).

Narrativity may be understood as an aspect of texts, experiences, and action; an aspect that invites more or less directs narrative responses. Narrativity is a matter-of-degree, rendering texts and speech more or less narrative. A wish for analytic clarity does not imply that narratives would exist as pure and distinct objects. It would be hopeless and misleading to assume that narratives are formally similar, always complete, and always neatly distinct from other kinds of discourse (Ochs and Capps 2001). “Narrative is first and foremost a prodigious variety of genres”, asserts Barthes (1966/1977, 79). This means that no definition will fit all narratives and that the desire for a conceptual consensus may be rather counter-productive.

ADVANTAGES OF USING AUTHENTIC SPOKEN TEXT IN THE CLASSROOM

- a. They show some important features of language.
- b. They help students understand the differences between some kinds of texts such as narratives or descriptions.
- c. They are practical and attractive for students who are studying how speaking is developed in real contexts.

ANALYSIS

1. Characteristics of spoken texts included in the subject’s oral narrative

The spoken mode contains a wide selection of significant characteristics that differentiate it from written texts. The first general element has to do with the organizational pattern of oral texts. Regarding this component, Brown (1991) reported that “speech is less richly organized than written language, containing less densely packed information, but containing more interactive markers and planning fillers.” Some of these features will be illustrated by lines taken from the transcription of the story. In EFL contexts, language learners must be aware of such differences in terms of lexicon in order to integrate those everyday expressions and discourse fillers into their productive vocabulary. Consider this group of idea units:

- (a) (17) But ah anyway he was coming back ah one day from .. ah,
 (18) I don't know why,
 (19) but he likes to go drinking anyway, (20)
 that's what alcoholics are basically,

In excerpt (a), the speaker uses language without necessarily following a certain organizational pattern while telling a story. Perturbations or interruptions are relevant features of speech. The speaker tries to tell the events of the story, and at the end of line (17), he stops, and somehow generalizes about his brother's preference and behavior toward alcohol in people with this addiction. If language learners at a lower level are not exposed to authentic language, it may be quite difficult to understand such a disorganized flow of ideas as soon as they deal with longer pieces of discourse in real contexts. The second feature deals with formulaic expressions. Brown and Yule (1991) explain that in the spoken language "the speaker typically uses a good deal of rather generalized vocabulary: *a lot of, got, do, thing, nice, stuff, place and things like that.*" This is a key feature of spoken language that teachers should pay attention to. Besides, the same source mentions that "the speaker may produce a large number of prefabricated fillers: *well, erm, I think, you know, if you see what I mean, of course, and so on.*" The following group of idea units, lines (lines 39, 90, 42 and 05), contain prefabricated expressions, that is, examples of discourse fillers such as *anyway, sort of, of course, or see what I mean* that is highly common in the spoken mode rather than in written formal language.

- (b) (39) ah A—nd the .. *anyway* what happened was he passed [??]
 (90) ah And *you know*,
 (42) and he *sort of* oh! Fortunately this was in the morning, (05)

that he was missing *sort of* a certain drug

Besides informal lexicon, the frequent use of single adjectives plays an important role in spoken language. In the following idea unit, the speaker describes what his brother's vehicle looked like before the car accident. In line (36) he uses a series of single adjectives (e.g., big, new, shiny and white) in order to let the receiver know what the external appearance of the car was before the incident

- (c) (34) ah He had just bought himself a *new* car,
 (35) it was a 1997 Thunder Bird,

(36) with *big motor nice new shinny white car*.

Finally, subordination is the fourth aspect exemplified in the script. In terms of spoken language, there is little subordination or hypotaxis: that is, spoken texts do not have an extensive use of subordinators in order to join clauses. Brown (1991) has pointed out the following:

In written language an extensive set of metalingual markers exists to mark relationships between clauses (*that* complementisers, *when / while* temporal markers, so-called ‘logical connectors’ like *besides, moreover, however, in spite of*, etc.), in spoken language the largely paratactically organized chunks are related by *and, but, then* and more rarely, *if*.

Therefore, consider this set of idea units:

- (d) (74) he says the [??] the staples pulled out,
- (75) and the wounds opened up,
- (76) and his intestines came out,
- (78) so he was holding his intestines in his hands,

In this excerpt, the speaker links the chunks of language using *and*, but he does not use other connectors such as *while* for instance. Coordination is, therefore, another important feature of the spoken mode. This is probably due to the ‘economy of effort’ that is present in spoken language.

2. Identifying and classifying ideas units in the subject’s oral narrative

The notion of idea unit plays a relevant role before trying to analyze oral narratives. Therefore, one of the tasks in order to analyze a spoken text is to divide it into its *idea units*; that is, the basic elements of consciousness that are used by the narrator to successfully transmit a message. Some experts have given the name of idea units to these spurts of language.

These idea units can be identified taking into account *intonation*. Due to the fact that the subject spoke fast in some parts of his narration, rising or falling intonation was the key in order to identify idea units. Those idea units that finish with a rising intonation should be marked with a comma, while the ones that end with falling intonation are indicated with a period (Chafe:1980). He also suggests that “idea units are typically separated by at least a brief pause, often only the slight break in tempo marked here with two dots.” In other words, pausing is an important factor that

serves to identify idea units while transcribing an oral text. Consider the following examples of idea units present in the oral story:

- (e) (08) ah A-nd so he doesn't have to work,
- (09) he gets his check every month,
- (10) so he has nothing else to do,
- (11) but spend it at the bars.

In excerpt (e), intonation is the key to separate idea units. In lines 8, 9 and 10, the dominant type of intonation at the end of the sentences is rising; that means that a comma is needed to separate them. In line 11, on the contrary, the speaker uses falling intonation at the end of it; consequently, a period is used. In this example, each idea is expressed by a single clause. Consider the following examples and the idea units they are divided into:

- (f) (30) and he says that he passed out
- (31) because of the medication that he was on,
- (32) b u t I t h i n k h e p a s s e d o u t (33)
- because of the medication and the alcohol he was on.

- (g) (74) he says the [??] the staples pulled out,
- (75) and the wound opened up,
- (75) and his intestines came out,
- (76) (interviewer) Oh my God!
- (77) so he was holding his intestines in his hands,
- (78) In the two excerpts above, some of the idea units start with words such as *and*, *but* and *so*. This is another way to distinguish idea units, however, according to Chafe (1980) some other idea units begin with any other type of conjunction.

3. Centers of interest

Narratives can be composed of idea units that can be classified in different ways. As Chafe (1980) has suggested, “*many narratives begin with the establishment of a setting.*” This deals with all the clues that help the listener locate in particular settings including distances or places. In fact, the subject’s story does begin with clear examples in terms of arrangement of the spatial orientation which helps the receiver or listener understand the narrative. This sequence of idea units illustrates this characteristic:

- (h) (23) Anyways he was coming back from a bar,
- (25) If you've been in the United States,
- (26) But that .. the roads there .. the main roads like the freeways have usually two or three lanes ah on one side,
- (27) And two or three lanes separated on the other side,
- (28) And anyway he was (he was) going about sixty miles an hour about a hundred kilometers an hour underneath the bridge,

Although most narratives begin with idea units that establish the setting of the story, it is common to find some spatial orientation throughout the oral text.

- (i) (54) and they air-lifted him to a hospital in Seattle,
- (55) this occurred in [???
- (56) which is about thirty miles South from Seattle, (j)
- (42) and he sort of! fortunately this was in the morning,

The idea units above do establish spatial orientation although they do not take place at the beginning of the story. They provide the receiver with relevant information related to the main events of the narrative. Another instance of orientation that is found in the text (line 42) is called temporal orientation. As its name suggests, it includes expressions that indicate the time in which specific events or actions take place.

A third aspect found in many narratives is the introduction and characterization of the people involved in the story. Even though this introduction does not belong to the main events of the narrative, they provide the audience with key data regarding interesting aspect of the participants' lives. The informant's narration is a good example of this feature since he gives a complete explanation of some essential and interesting details of his brother's life. The following group of idea units exemplifies this fact:

- (k) (1) He actually he got a medical discharge,
- (2) they determined that he was at that point,
- (3) when he is in the military,
- (4) that he had a chemical imbalance in his head,
- (5) that he was missing sort of a certain drug

- (6) that helped him maintain stability;
- (7) so ever since then, he's been on a medical pension from the military, from the army, the air force.
- (8) Ah A—and so he doesn't have to work.
- (9) He gest his check every month,
- (10) So he has nothing else to do,
- (11) But spends it at the bars.

This introductory orientation is part of a segment of the narrative called *background*, that is, the portion of the story that gives additional material which allows the listener to evaluate the main events of the plot. By paying attention to the explanation above, the receiver can learn many details about the subject's life before the speaker moves on to the most important events of the story.

In transcribing an oral narrative, the notion of *center of interest* must be taken into account. A center of interest can be defined as a group of idea units related to a certain event or topic. According to Chafe (1980) a center of interest “often includes a set of events leading to a goal.” While in the written mode punctuation marks are used to separate sentences, in the spoken mode the listener should focus on those groups of lines that relate to single topics. This is particularly relevant when one tries to transcribe an oral narrative. In some cases, these centers of interest might be clearly indicated by coordinating and/or subordinating conjunctions. As a matter of fact, in this oral narrative most centers of interest include coordinating conjunctions such as *and*, *but* and/or *so*. In some idea units, relative pronouns may also be used.

- (1) (52) ah A--nd .. they had to ah the medics,
- (53) the medical unit that arrived there had to get him out of the car,
- (54) and they air-lifted him to a hospital in Seattle,
- (55) this occurred in [???
- (56) which is about thirty miles South from Seattle,
- (57) and air-lifted him there.

The center of interest above consists of a series of idea units which are mostly linked by the conjunction *and*. The main goal of this group of idea units is to tell how the subject's brother was

cued by the paramedics and taken to the hospital by helicopter. Due to the fact that lines 52-57 have a specific goal, they form one single center of interest.

4. Perturbations of oral narrative

When one listens to an oral narrative, the audience has to cope with frequent interruptions or insertions of extra ideas. Chafe (1980) has pointed out that “speakers do not achieve the expression of a series of idea units without some trouble; natural speech exhibits a variety of perturbations in this process.” In other words, a perturbation is a significant feature of spoken language because of its spontaneity. In the subject’s oral narrative, many instances of perturbation can be found. The first perturbation takes place at the beginning of the narrative. Consider these excerpts:

- (m) (17) But ah anyway he was coming back ah one day from .. ah,
- (18) don’t know why
- (19) But he likes to go drinking anyway,
- (20) That’s what alcoholics are basically,
- (21) He doesn’t he wouldn’t invent it as a kind of problem,
- (22) But I think he does.

Notice how in line 17 the narrator starts telling the main events of the story and then hesuddenly stops and interrupts the narrative to refer to his brother’s drinking problem. Other kinds of perturbations found throughout this narrative are *postponements* of the plot in orderto add supporting details to the story. That is, some of the key idea units of the story are described later in the plot. In addition, there is a second type of perturbation in the text which is illustrated in the following group of idea units:

- (n) (23) Anyways he was coming back from a bar
- (24) A—nd he was oh! I don’t know
- (25) If you’ve been in the United States,
- (26) But that .. the roads there .. the main roads like the freeways have usually
two or three lanes ah on one side,
- (27) And two or three lanes separated on the other side,

(28) And anyway he was (he was) going about sixty miles an hour about
hundred kilometers an hour underneath the bridge

In this case the speaker interrupts himself after line 23 to produce lines 24-27. He includes some supporting information on what the U.S. highways look like. However, he never abandons the idea he has been focusing on since the beginning of the story in line 23, and he goes back to the main events in line 28. An interesting detail is the fact that he uses non-past verbs instead of past tense in these lines (24-27). A possible explanation for this deals with the notions of the *foreground* and *background* information of oral narratives. As Bardovi-Harlig (1992) explains, the foreground refers to the skeleton of the narrative, that is, the main actions that constitute its plot. On the contrary, the background information provides additional material to the foreground. Non-past verbs are frequently used in the background while past tense is mostly used in the foreground.

5. Chronological elements in Mark Earle's oral narrative

Chafe (1980) explains that narratives are composed of chronological or structural elements such as "abstract, orientation, and resolution". The first element is called abstract. It is defined as a short summary of the whole story usually told in a few idea units. There is no abstract in the informant's narrative because he starts telling the story as soon as he finishes his introduction. The second part of the narrative is the orientation. It establishes spatial and temporal orientation. The spatial and temporal orientation has been previously exemplified. In addition, this narrative does include a very complete introduction before the speaker starts telling his brother's danger-of-death experience. This short introduction is followed by the complex events that tell the action of the story. Another element is the resolution, that is, how the story reaches its end. These lines illustrate this concept:

- (o) (84) He is forty years old,
- (85) and he has to walk real slowly,

- (86) he got ah and they put some pins in one of his leg,
- (87) and he has to go back for his physical therapy on a regular basis,
- (88) ah and it was because of this one stupid mistake,
- (89) ah one event .. one life-boltering event.

The excerpt above includes the end of the narrative. This resolution tells the receiver that the most important events of the story are coming to an end (lines 86-89). It is interesting to notice that although the plot of this narrative consists of the serious car accident Mark's brother suffered, the narrator also refers to follow-up events that took place at the hospital after he was operated on. Once the resolution is given, the speaker comes up with a brief evaluation of his brother's actions. He ends his story by saying that in spite of the dangerous accident he had due to the influence of alcohol, his brother has not changed his behavior.

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APPENDIX

TRANSCRIPT OF ORAL NARRATIVE

- (1) He actually he got a medical discharge,
(2) they determined that he was at that point,
(3) when he is in the military,
(4) that he had a chemical imbalance in his head,
(5) that he was missing sort of a certain drug,
(6) that helped him maintain stability;
(7) so ever since then, he's been on a medical pension from the military, from the
army, the air force.
(8) Ah A—and so he doesn't have to work.
(9) He gets his check every month,
(10) so he has nothing else to do,
(11) but spends it at the bars.
(12) And you know,
(13) He sells different cars back and forth.
(14) He is not supposed to drink, by the way
(15) Because of his medication,
(16) And the medication and the alcohol don't mix.
(17) But ah.. anyway he was coming back ah one day from..ah,
(18) I don't know why
(19) But he likes to go drinking anyway,
(20) That's what alcoholics are basically,
(21) He doesn't he wouldn't invent it as a kind of problem,
(22) But I think he does.
(23) Anyways he was coming back from a bar,
(24) A—and he was oh! I don't know
(25) If you've been in the United States,

- (26) But that .. the roads there .. the main roads like the freeways have usually two or three lanes
ah on one side
- (27) And two or three lanes separated on the other side,
- (28) And anyway he was (he was) going about sixty miles an hour about a hundred
kilometers an hour underneath the bridge,
- (29) Where he passed out,
- (30) And he says that he passed out
- (31) Because of the medication that he was on,
- (32) But I think he passed out
- (33) Because of the medication and the alcohol he was on.
- (34) Ah He had just bought himself a new car,
- (35) It was a 1997 Thunder Bird,
- (36) With big motor nice new shinny white car.
- (37) (interviewer) very fancy
- (38) ah very fancy
- (39) ah A-- nd .. anyway what happened was as he passed [???
- (40) he passed the bridge,
- (41) he passed out,
- (42) and he sort of oh! Fortunately this was in the morning,
- (43) there were not a lot of cars,
- (44) but he sort of left the road,
- (45) went through a ditch,
- (46) went through a fence,
- (47) a--nd kept going about two hundred yards,
- (48) and ah he hit a tree off the side of the road,
- (49) ah totally destroyed the car.
- (50) I saw a picture of it,
- (51) it was just a mangled mess.
- (52) ah A--nd .. they had to ah the medics,

(53) the medical unit that arrived there had to get him out of the car,
(54) and they air-lifted him to a hospital in Seattle,
(55) this occurred in [??]
(56) which is about thirty miles South from Seattle,
(57) and air-lifted him there.
(58) And they were sure
(59) He was going to make it
(60) He was in a critic-care units for a couple of weeks
(61) ah a-nd he had several internal injuries,
(62) they had to do an abdominal surgery on him.
(63) And ah one of the things that happened to him
(64) as he was recovering,
(65) he thought that he was wrong
(66) until he got up and started walking around,
(67) while he had a surgery in his stomach
(68) that was put together with staples,
(69) it was a surgery that was stapled,
(70) and it was kind of weak,
(71) ah and I think this is actually kind of funny
(72) that scared the hell out of him,
(73) when he was getting up,
(74) he says the [??] the staples pulled out,
(75) and the wound opened up,
(76) and his intestines came out,
(77) (interviewer) oh my God!
(78) So he was holding his intestines in his hands,
(79) and ah he says it was one of those frightening things that he has ever seen,
(80) (interviewer) and that happened at the hospital
(81) that was at the hospital yeah (that was at the hospital)

(82) this was actually about two weeks trying to ah recover from the accident
(83) but the .. he ah [???)
(84) He is forty years old,
(85) and he has to walk real slowly,
(86) he got ah and they put some pins in one of his leg,
(87) and he has to go back for his physical therapy on a regular basis,
(88) ah and it was because of this one stupid mistake,
(89) ah one event .. one life-boltering event.
(90) ah And you know,
(91) there is something despite of this,
(92) he hasn't changed on that much,
(93) I mean he still does the same thing,
(94) he is not .. he still goes drinking,
(95) he's not working in place.
(96) ah .. So I'm kind of surprised actually and kind of disappointed
(97) because this was a good opportunity for him to to wake up
(98) let's say
(99) Oh my God! You know,
this is serious