Discourse analysis

So far, we have concentrated on cases in which people made sense of quite strange disjointed utterances.

However, when we use language, we do not necessarily do so in a random and unstructured way.

Both conversation and written texts have various devices for welding together miscellaneous utterances into a cohesive whole.

Discourse analysis

A. George ate the curry with delight. Curry had always been George's favourite food. The curry was subtly flavoured. George detected hints of cumin and coriander in the curry. Cumin and coriander are George's favourite spices.

B. George ate the curry with delight. This type of food had always been his favourite. The dish was subtly flavoured, and in it he detected hints of his favourite spices, cumin and coriander.

Discourse analysis

The two versions are more or less the same as far as semantic content is concerned, and the syntax is fairly similar. Nevertheless, there is a lot of difference between the two. The second is both stylistically better, and more normal-sounding. The first appears to have been written sentence by sentence, without any attention to the overall effect.

In the second, various devices have been used in order to link the sentences together into a cohesive whole: after its first occurrence, the word *curry* has been replaced by alternative words *this type of food* , *the dish* , and by the pronoun *it* . Similarly, *George* has been replaced by *he* , and in some places, the order of words has been altered so as to maintain the smooth connections, as when in *it* was brought to the front of its clause. In addition, some of the original sentences have been joined together.

Discourse analysis

Discourse analysis is the study which deals with this topic. It overlaps with stylistics , the study of linguistics and literature.

Devices which maintain the smooth flow of communication are particularly important in written language, where there is no one available to clarify unclear points. However, many of these devices are also used in ordinary conversation. Consider two versions of the same dialogue:

Discourse analysis

A. Edna: Someone ought to lock up Fred .

Minnie: Fred is a disgrace .

Edna: Someone caught Fred peeping at the new lodger

through the bathroom window .

Minnie: What is the name of the new lodger? Is the name

of the new lodger Arabella or Annabel?

B. Edna: Fred ought to be locked up .

Minnie: That man's a disgrace .

Edna: He was caught peeping through the bathroom

window at the new lodger.

Minnie: What's her name? Is it Arabella or Annabel?

Discourse analysis

The first version sounds stilted and odd, even though by itself, each sentence is well formed. The second version sounds far more like an ordinary conversation. It contains devices similar to those used in the piece of prose about George and his curry: after the first occurrence of *Fred* , the alternative phrase *that man* and the pronoun *he* have been used. The third sentence has been changed into the passive, in order to keep Fred at the centre of attention. And so on. The overall result is that the whole dialogue becomes linked together into a cohesive whole, something that people who know a language do automatically – though people learning a second language usually have to be taught this skill, as the devices used vary in their details from language to language.

Discourse analysis

Yesterday I was sitting in the College Garden. There was a girl sitting beside me. The girl's friend saw the girl and told the girl, "Are you still here?" The girl was obviously sitting there. The girl's friend knew that. The girl's friend indirectly meant why didn't the girl go home or why the girl's taxi had been late.

Yesterday I was sitting in the College Garden, and there was a girl sitting beside me. Her friend saw her and told her "Are you still here?" She was obviously sitting there, and she knew that but she indirectly meant why didn't she go home or why her taxi had been late.