The Meaning of Texts

Understanding the Meaning of Texts and Reinforcing Foundation Skills Through Discourse Analysis

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Introduction

Inherent to the interpreting process is the goal of determining the meaning of a source language message and the equivalency of that message in a target language. Achieving this goal requires the interpreter possess bilingual and bicultural competence and specific cognitive processing skills required to analyze all of the constituent parts of both the source and target languages (Cokely, 1992). The focus of this article is to define a system of discourse analysis that has been used in the Educational Interpreter Certificate (EICP) Program since 1996 as part of the interpreting skills coursework. It engages interpreting students in an investigation of the constituent parts of messages for the purpose of identifying meaning in preparation for the task of interpretation. The system of discourse analysis described in this article is based on elements of a model defined by Winston and Monikowski (2000), as well as discussions of text analysis and the interpreting process offered by Colonomos (1992), Isham (1985) and Witter-Merithew (1986, 1997). Additionally, the system of discourse analysis discussed in this article will be related to the cognitive stages associated with interpreting, as described by Cokely (1992), in an effort to demonstrate how the system of discourse analysis can be used to isolate and reinforce foundation skills related to the process of interpreting.

It should also be noted that the EICP staff and faculty (1996-present) have contributed to the application and evolution of this system in various classroom settings. As well, the EICP students have provided valuable insight into the value of the system in their acquisition of interpreting skills. Although the number of these individuals precludes their individual recognition in this context, their contributions to this discussion have been invaluable, are greatly appreciated, and hereby acknowledged.

Defining Discourse Analysis

In order to discuss discourse analysis, it is necessary to begin with a definition of discourse and discourse analysis. Defined simply, discourse is the way we talk about what we choose to talk about. According to Hatch (1992), it is the study of how communication is structured so that it is socially appropriate as well as grammatically accurate and meaningful. Our use of discourse is an expression of

our social and cultural identity because we acquire our use of it through the environments in which we are socialized—home, school, work, and community. We learn to communicate using specific forms and content/topics based on the social norms of the environments in which we live and communicate. Accordingly, discourse is bound to the social contexts in which it is used. Therefore, meaning is also bound to social contexts.

Discourse analysis is the act of distinguishing and considering the component parts of a message in order to understand the whole of the message (Witter-Merithew, 1987). It is a systematic process of looking at the different parts of what we say and how we say it to discover some of the influences and beliefs that frame our perspectives and influence the meaning of our messages. For interpreters, it is analysis that enables accurate content (themes, topics, and events), appropriate context (setting, participants, purpose/goals), and appropriate linguistic form (discourse structure, coherence, transitions, vocabulary, etc.) to be conveyed (Winston & Monikowski, 2000).

The discourse analysis process promotes deeper bilingual and bicultural competence in interpreters. This is essential to effective interpretation because language and culture are so intertwined that it is not possible to understand accurately a person's semantic intent until/unless the interpreter also understands

individual and their identity as a member of a societal group (Cokely, 1992). Additionally, the relationships that exist between participants—both those that are perceived and those that are real—influence the context. These relationships have impact on the assumptions held by the participants, the level of comfort and openness that will be shared between participants, and the manner in which messages will be constructed between participants (Isham, 1985).

By way of example, consider how your state of mind is impacted when you enter a communication exchange with someone right after having an argument with a family member or friend. This temporary state will have impact on your attention and level of comfort. Likewise, the use of certain medications prior to an interaction could impact on your concentration and level of participation in a communication exchange. This too would be a temporary state. Permanent states, such as Alzheimer's or mental illness, would also impact on the communication exchange. As well, perceptions about status differentials, power imbalances, level of familiarity and trust would also impact on how individuals communicate with one another.

There are additional factors that influence the individual and impact on how an individual expresses, receives, and perceives messages. These factors are general knowledge, episodic expectations, associated relations, cultural awareness, and world-view.

General knowledge refers to a reflection of the breadth and depth of one's knowledge of people and events in one's own world and the world at large (both past and present.)

Typically, general knowledge is a reflection of those areas about which one is willing to offer an opinion and about which one is willing to listen to and solicit others' opinions (Cokely, 1992).

Episodic expectations refer to a person's conscious and intuitive sense of what will or what should happen in a given situation or setting (Cokely, 1992). Some authors refer to episodic expectations as scripts or schemas.

Associated relations are the assumptions individuals make about the level of shared knowledge, shared experience, shared recollection of a given experience, shared affect toward a particular person or topic that exists between themselves and those with whom they communicate (Cokely, 1992).

Cultural awareness refers to a person's conscious and intuitive understanding of the norms of expected and restricted behaviors, topics, lexical items, etc. within a given group or a given sub-group (Smith, 1998).

A person's Weltanschauung represents the totality of one's experiences and perspectives in life—their worldview (Pollitt, 2000). Worldview is influenced by

subject is buying a car or a pair of shoes, or a job interview is a job interview regardless of whether it is for the position of a CEO or waitress. Accordingly, some standard procedures and practices surround certain activity types. Understanding and appreciating these standard procedures and practices allows interpreters to generalize certain parts of their world knowledge and helps them to more effectively anticipate what is likely to transpire during a particular activity.

The subject matter refers to the specific content at a more detailed level—such as the service plan available for the car being purchased, the financing options for purchasing the car, the specific colors the shoes are available in, or the accessories for caring for the particular type of leather of which the shoes are made. Purpose constitutes an important element of the context and is defined by activity type and subject matter.

In summary, context is an important part of discourse analysis. Considering the participants, the setting, and the purpose will provide significant insight into the meaning of messages. As well, considering all the factors that impact on an individual's expression, reception and perception of meaning will enable the interpreter to more consistently and effectively realize semantic intent and achieve semantic equivalency (Isham, 1985, Colonomos, 1992). When engaging in the interpreting process, context must be considered.

Cognitive Processes in Interpretation

Cokely (1992) delineates serialized stages of cognitive processing that are inherent to effective interpretation. He notes that interpreting is, "probably more accurately described as serialized parallel processes, because they are undoubtedly several processes functioning simultaneously in an ordered, dependent relationship to each other." Therefore, if the interpreter experiences difficulties in the early stages of the process, this will have implication for the later stages in the process. Further, Cokely (1992) states that bilingual and bicultural competence is a pre-requisite to being able to apply the model in a consistent and accurate manner. This principle is also stated in the work of Taylor (1993), whose diagnostic research of English to ASL interpreting performance indicates that the majority of errors that were observed related to a lack of ASL competence rather than interpretation competence.

Ideally, students of interpretation come to the task already possessing bilingual and bicultural competence. Then, they engage in practice of each stage in the cognitive process in order to develop the requisite mental skills for interpreting. Mastery of each stage in isolation through the process of translation and consecutive interpretation further establishes the cognitive processing skills required to convey accurate interpretations (Colonomos, 1992). Eventually, through the application of dual-tasking skills, simultaneous interpretation can be achieved. The model of discourse analysis that will be described later in this article is designed to engage students of interpretation in addressing each stage in Cokely's model of cognitive processing, while simultaneously investigating the meaning of messages by exploring the component parts of the message.

Cokely posits seven major stages of cognitive processing (1992). The stages are:

- **Message Reception**
- **Preliminary Processing**
- **Short Term Message Retention**
- **Semantic Intent Realized**
- **Semantic Equivalence Determination**
- **Syntactic Message Formulation**
- **Message Production**

The following section summaries the seven major stages as described by Cokely (1992).

Message Reception relates to the interpreter's ability to accurately perceive the source language (SL) message. If an interpreter is unable to achieve accurate perception of the message, the remainder of the process will be ineffective. Message reception occurs through visual perception/reception or auditory perception/reception. For this reason, the interpreter must be able to see and/or hear the speaker who is generating the source language message. Anything that prohibits the ability to perceive/receive the message (poor eye sight, distance, noise, loss of hearing) will impact on the accuracy of message reception. **Preliminary Processing** is the stage of primary recognition through which messages are filtered. During this stage, the phonological rules of the SL are applied and if the incoming message does not fit the expected norms, it will be discarded. This is the stage of the process where attention is given to how the message is being formed and delivered so it can be recognized and understood.

Short Term Message Retention allows the interpreter to hold onto a string of lexical items that form the incoming message until sufficient information has been received to accurately understand the meaning and/or function of the message. The incoming message is analyzed and 'chunked' into small units that, ideally, retain the essentials of meaning. These 'chunks" are then 'pegged' in the memory for further analysis and either lead to an understanding of meaning or are absorbed by larger 'chunks'. The size of the 'chunk' depends on whether the message is being processed at a lexical, phrasal, sentential or discourse level (Craig and Lockhart, 1972). There are many factors that will contribute to the level of analysis that occurs at this stage. Some of the factors are prior knowledge, preparation, memory skills, and prediction skills. Accurate understanding of any given 'chunk' is related to the level at which it was analyzed and processed.

Semantic Intent Realization is that stage where the interpreter achieves some degree of comprehension of the portion(s) of the SL message that has been 'chunked'. The goal is that the semantic intent understood by the interpreter is that originally intended by the speaker. Whether this is what happens depends on the degree of analysis the interpreter achieved. This is why discourse analysis is so important. It is a process that fosters an interpreter's ability to explore,

appreciate, and determine meaning based on a variety of factors. So, for example, the more contextual knowledge the interpreter has (about the participants, setting, and purpose), the more content knowledge the interpreter has (about the topic, the main ideas, the specialized vocabulary), and the more knowledge of the form of the message the interpreter has (overall organization and coherence), the more effective the interpreter will be in understanding what the speaker intended by the message that was conveyed.

A Ten-Step Discourse Analysis Process

The ten-steps in the process are:

- **Step 1: Prediction**
- **Step 2: View and Recall**
- **Step 3: Content Mapping**
- **Step 4: Salient Linguistic Features**
- **Step 5: Abstraction**
- **Step 6: Retelling in Source Language**
- **Step 7: Salient Linguistic Features in the Target Language**
- **Step 8: Visualization Mapping**
- **Step 9: Retell in Target Language**
- **Step 10: Interpretation**

A discussion of each step and how it relates to the stages of cognitive processing provide insight into the purpose and focus of the steps individually and collectively.

Step 1: Prediction Brainstorming

This step is intended to draw on the knowledge the interpreter already possesses and to foster the prediction of information that is likely to be associated with a given topic. A specific topic and context is provided and the interpreter works to identify what ideas, themes, relationships, and events they anticipate being discussed in the context provided (Winston and Monikowski, 2000). The information is recorded—using only key words or phrases in a random fashion on a piece of paper. The purpose of recording the information is to provide a visual way to perceive the message. The act of recording frames the 'internal' thoughts as an 'incoming' message, because it places the thought 'on' the piece of paper. This act also begins the process of 'chunking' possible ideas. The purpose of the random recording of information is to foster a 'free-flow' of ideas, rather than prematurely trying to impose a structure or form on the topic being brainstormed.

This step of analysis is preparation for preliminary processing. It creates attention to the topic and a readiness for what information will actually be communicated.

Step 2: Recall Brainstorming

The first part of this step involves viewing or listening to the actual text. This should be done without the aid of any note taking or recording of information. The goal is to receive the information for the purpose of comprehension.

After viewing the text, randomly recall what was discussed in the text (Winston & Monikowski). Recording the recall of information in a random manner allows for the natural memory to emerge. The recording should be done in a visual-spatial manner versus a linear manner so that a natural clustering of ideas will occur.

So, in summary, content mapping:

- Organizes content in a hierarchy; themes, main ideas, supporting ideas, supporting details

- Creates synergy because it taps into the imaginative and intuitive side of the brain

- Can be done in one of several formats; the tree, wheel, or web are the most common

- Breaks the form of the message and fosters attention to the meaning and relationship of ideas

- Demonstrates the relationships between pieces of information (coherence) in a visual/spatial manner

- Reinforces short-term memory, creates visual pegs that support recall, and fosters analysis of the message to isolate/distinguish primary versus secondary information

This step fosters a deeper level of processing for meaning and will aid in recall because it helps to identify the textual coherence within the text (Winston & Monikowski, 2000). Once meaning and textual coherence are understood, semantic intent realization has been achieved. Thus, this step can be used to reinforce the working memory needed to achieve semantic intent realization.

It is important to note that the mapping is done from RECALL only. The process does not include going back to the original text and viewing it again and again to make sure the map is created accurately. The intent is that the process simulates what transpires during the stages of the interpreting process. Therefore, engaging in the content mapping from recall ONLY is essential to fostering the development of more effective preliminary processing, working memory, and semantic intent realization skills.

Step 4: Salient Linguistic Features in Source Language

Before leaving the stage of semantic intent realization, it is important to also consider the prosody of the message. While content mapping focuses on WHAT was said and how the information was organized, prosody focuses on HOW it was said. So, prosody refers to the features that are used to convey the mood and affect that emerges within a text. These features also contribute to the overall coherence of the text (Winston & Monikowski, 2000).

So, in this step, there is reflection on the text for the purpose of identifying the specific linguistic features that were used to convey prosody—the features that were essential or central in conveying the mood, style, and manner of the message. As well, it focuses on how message coherence was achieved. Likely, this will draw attention to behaviors such as affect, pacing, pausing, stress, emphasis, inflection, intonation, and message coherence. What language features

were used to accomplish the prosody? Were certain pieces of information repeated? Did this create emphasis? Were certain portions of the message emphasized through vocal or visual inflection or some other feature/behavior? Was attention drawn to a portion of the message through pacing or pausing? Did pacing and pausing contribute to transition from one idea to the next in the message? Questions like these are useful in helping to isolate/ identify the salient linguistic features.   Identifying these features is important, because these features contribute further to the understanding of the intent of the message.

Listing these features is an important strategy for reflection and later, for the stage of message formulation. The listing can be referred to, at the same time the content map is referred to, during the discourse analysis stage of 're-telling'. The content map, in concert with the list of salient linguistic features, provides the mnemonic device necessary for accurately re-constructing the SL message.

In summary, identifying salient linguistic features provides additional insight into the semantic intent realization and assists in recognition of the prosody within a message. It is one of the more challenging steps in the discourse analysis process, because message prosody and coherence are not frequently addressed within the interpreting process.

Step 5: Abstraction

Abstraction is another challenging step in the discourse analysis process. In this step, the essence or overarching point/principle/ generalization embedded in the text is expressed in a one-line statement. The statement is expressed in the form of an underlying moral, principle, or point expressed implicitly in the text. Determining an abstraction fosters inference skills and inference skills enhance an interpreter's ability to determine deeper levels of meaning.

Creating an abstraction should not be confused with deciding a title for the text or restating the main idea or thesis in the text. The abstraction requires going to a deeper level of processing to identify an implied message that is within the text. The best abstractions are the ones that isolate the essence of the text in a statement that is generalizable. Consider some examples.

Creating an abstraction of the text involves breaking the form of the text and looking for a deeper level of meaning. So, if the text is addressing the difficulties of buying fresh fish, and the way you can tell that a fish is not fresh, the abstract might be, "Buyer Beware!". This is a statement that is generalizable to other situations as well. The statement, "How to Buy Fresh Fish" would make a nice title, but would not be an effective abstraction. Instead, it is a concrete representation of the information within the text.

Here is another example. If the text is describing the use of a vacuum cleaner hose covered by a nylon stocking for finding a lost contact lens, the abstract might be, "Necessity is the mother of invention." Again, the essence of the text—the

underlying inference or overarching point of the message—is conveyed in a one-line statement that is generalizable to other situations. Again, statements such as, "Panty hose save the day!", or, "What to do if you lose your contact." are effective as titles, or as headlines of a newspaper, but they are not abstractions because they retain the form of the source language message and follow the topic too closely.

Identifying an abstraction for a message allows for creativity and imagination. It is an excellent way to develop and enhance inference skills. Inference skills enable an interpreter to find implied meaning—meaning that is not stated in a direct or explicit manner, but is insinuated by exploring the meaning of the text at a deeper level. This step in the process relates to confirming the semantic intent realization of the SL message and provides the kernel structure that can carry into the process of transferring meaning from the SL to the TL.

In summary, creating the abstract:
- Provides a representation of the text in a one-line statement
- Conveys the meaning of the text by identifying the underlying moral, principle, or point of the text
- Fosters a focus on the text that totally breaks the for wne statement
-

language competence. This, in turn, strengthens the foundation of bilingual/bicultural competence that is pre-requisite to interpreting.

As is true with Steps 3, 4, and 5, this step relates to semantic intent realization and the message transfer process required to begin an exploration of the stage of semantic equivalence determination.

Step 7: Salient Linguistic Features in Target Language

In Step 4, the salient linguistic features of the SL message were identified. This process is now repeated, focusing on those TL linguistic features that would be used to convey the mood and intent conveyed in the SL message. This step requires application of bilingual and bicultural competence in the TL.

In this step, there is consideration of the specific linguistic features of the TL that are used to convey prosody—the features that are essential or central in conveying the mood, style, and manner of TL messages. This consideration is then narrowed to the specific SL text to isolate the TL linguistic features that will create equivalency in meaning. Focus on how message coherence can be achieved in the TL. Focus on the TL behaviors used to create affect, pacing, pausing, stress, emphasis, inflection, intonation, and message coherence. Identifying these features is important to creating a message that is equivalent at the level of prosody.

Listing these features is an important strategy for reflection and later, for the stage of message formulation in the TL. The listing can be referred to at the same time the visualization map (Step 8) is referred to during the discourse analysis step of TL 're-telling'. The visualization map, in concert with the list of TL salient linguistic features provides the mnemonic device necessary for accurately re-constructing the TL message.

When identifying the salient linguistic features for the target language:
- Review the salient linguistic features listed for the source language text
- Consider how the same functions of manner, style, coherence, and organization would be conveyed in the target language.
- Determine what additional features of the target language might also be utilized to convey an equivalent message

This step relates to the cognitive stage of determining semantic equivalence and prepares for the stage of message formulation.

Step 8: Visualization Mapping

Step 10: Interpretation

The final step in the EICP discourse analysis system is to interpret the message in a simultaneous format into the target language. This is the step in the process that ultimately brings together all the other steps in an integrated fashion. Doing this involves dual tasking—the ability to cognitively manage multiple tasks simultaneously. Dual tasking is a pre-requisite skill to simultaneous interpreting. Again, when this activity is done in a group-learning context, peers can discuss the interpretation, considering the effective application of salient linguistic features and the inclusion of key ideas from the visualization-map. Ideally, the peer feedback can be used to do an immediate re-interpretation of the text to integrate the feedback.

Summary

The more often this discourse analysis system is repeated, allowing for each step to be rehearsed and practiced in isolation, with periodic integration of the steps during re-telling, the more effectively the students become prepared mentally to anticipate, comprehend, restructure, transfer, and formulate messages that are accurate and equivalent. Eventually, the student trains himself or herself to think and process information in a manner that integrates the steps automatically and simultaneously. When this happens, the students start to listen to information differently, begin to think about meaning at deeper levels, and to consider the component parts and context of the message before generating an interpretation. When an interpreter is able to do this consistently, the reliability and accuracy of their work will be significantly enhanced.

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