

JOURNAL OF ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

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Wale Adegoke

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A section, though too short, on information structure is a welcome feature, as is also the (even shorter) section on discourse marking. More traditional sections on word-formation, prosody and punctuation complete the text, apart from the indexes/indices (see p. 99) and notes on further reading.

Yes, a lively and entertaining book, that will prove helpful and stimulating to both student and lay person; and good value too for the £3.95 it costs in UK. With this book safely under the belt, the reader will feel confident in tackling the bigger grammars and the further reading.

Reference:

SINCLAIR, J.M. (1972) A Course in Spoken English Grammar London. OUP.

BOOK REVIEW

Guy Cook, Discourse. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989, vi + 165 pp.

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Introduction

Adegbite (1991) in his review article on van Dijk's Text and Context: An Exploration in the Semantics and Pragmatics of Discourse (1977) observes the need for a comprehensive theory of English Discourse (or theory of Discourse of relevance to English) which will consider both native and non-native speakers' perspectives on communication in English. He opines that such a theory should, among other things, discuss the fundamental principles and components of English discourse and the issues related to its teaching and use. It is against that background that a review of Guy Cook's (1989) book Discourse is carried out. It is also pertinent to note that the review is undertaken from the viewpoint of a discourse analyst and scholar of English as Second Language.

Discourse introduces the reader to the theories, properties and presentation of the communication phenomenon known as discourse in language learning and teaching. The book is divided into three sections; theory and properties of the discourse, demonstration of discourse in language learning and teaching, and exploration of discourse development in the classroom. The first and second sections are equally developed in six chapters each, while the third section has only one chapter.

Theories of Discourse

Section one of Discourse is no doubt of immeasurable value to every reader who intends to know more about language and communication processes via the instrument of discourse.

This section is divided into two parts. The first part describes the nature and properties of the discourse. Here the author shows that discourse is a larger unit than the sentence. While it may be constituted by well-formed sentences, it does not have to be so constituted (p. 7).

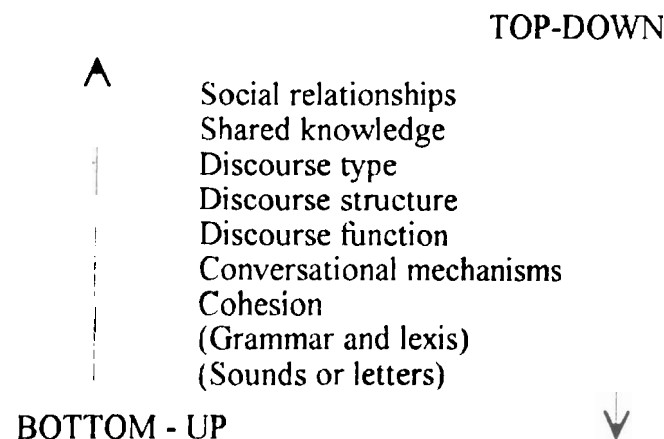
In the development of discourse the formal features of language and the extra-linguistic features of the context of communication are integrated. The formal features extend beyond the grammar and meaning of the sentence to the grammar and meaning above it. Above the sentence (i.e. in the text), some features cut across which include verb forms, parallelism, referring expressions, repetition and lexical chains, substitution, ellipsis and conjunction. In contrast to these features, the non-formal features of discourse include discourse type and functions, principles of cooperation and conversation, speech acts and coherence phenomena. At this point the author aptly comments that the occurrence of these non-formal features in the production and reception of discourse may be guided by cultural orientations of participants' experiences and languages (p.24). The aptness and significance of this observation are marked by the fact that the observation represents either the point of meeting or that of departure for the accurate recording of the interactions between various combinations of native and non-native speakers of a language (e.g. native with native, native with non-native, non-native and non-native interlocutors in a language).

Unlike the first part, the second part of Discourse might be rather daunting initially to readers who are not familiar with discourse theory. However, coming after the explanation and familiarization with the concepts in the first part, even the non-specialist readers should be able to follow and participate in the author's discussion of differing (but not necessarily mutually exclusive) views of discourse as a product or process-oriented

phenomenon. One vital information given in this part is that a discourse reflects the speaker-hearer's world and social knowledge and that the order of information in discourse reveals the speaker's assumptions about the world and about the state(s) of knowledge of his hearer(s); the success or failure of communication depends on the truth or falsity of the speaker's assumptions.

Discourse in Language Learning and Teaching

Section Two of Discourse identifies two approaches to developing discourse skills. The 'bottom-up' approach proceeds from a study of the most detailed features of discourse towards the most general features while the 'top-down' approach proceeds from the most general features to the most detailed. The book illustrates the components of discourse studies in these approaches in Chapter 7 (p.80) thus:



As a corollary to the above approaches, the book identifies two kinds of activities in discourse studies. The top-down approach utilizes the 'holistic' activity whereby all levels of language are regarded as working together as a whole. On the contrary, the bottom-up approach divides communication into discrete levels which can be dealt with separately. The author observes (p.83) that a good deal of language teaching has involved the atomistic kind of activity in that it has considered only the formal language system, often in isolated sentences, without demonstrating or developing the way that system operates in context. According to him, while the separation of communication into discrete levels may have a role to play in the study and teaching of discourse, such levels ought to be re-integrated if a proper understanding of discourse is to take place. He says (p.83):

Communication is so complex an interaction of mind, language and the physical world that it can be disconcerting to try to deal with at once. Yet we should not forget that communication does involve handling everything together, usually at high speed...

The author of Discourse apparently supports the top-down approach and holistic activity in discourse studies, as he says (p.84):

...Infants developing competence in their first language, experience it as a working high-speed whole, yet acquire native speaker competence without any formal instruction, apparently without effort, without any conscious formulations of rules, and without splitting down into manageable 'areas'.

But he concedes that native and foreign language adult learners, unlike children, have abilities to think about the language, uncover

its systematicity, think and talk metalinguistically. Although native and foreign language acquisition may be similar in many respects, they also differ in some important aspects: thus in the foreign language acquisition, there are valid arguments for a degree of atomism (and consequently the study of formal features) as an intermediate measure (p. 85). Following the top-down approach consideration of components of discourse the book later discusses various activities and procedures of developing discourse skills. In the discussion the apparent utilization of the direct instruction strategy (cf. Baumann 1989) with its accompanying steps of teacher-pupil, pupil-teacher and full pupil responsibilities for learning is very helpful to readers.

Exploration: Discourse development in the classroom

Section Three is apparently the shortest section in the book. Its focus is on ways in which teachers can explore and make use of the theoretical and pedagogical approaches in Section One and Two. The exploration requires the participation of teacher and pupils in series of tasks. To guide the exploration practical activities and exercises for discourse learners are suggested.

Several tasks are set out under four sub-headings: aim, resources, procedure and evaluation. The tasks examine and consider materials on the development of discourse and treat topics pertaining to the top-down approach to comprehension which considers, for example, the effect or role of social relationships, shared knowledge, knowledge of discourse types and structure, etc.

Conclusion

There is no doubt at all that Discourse is of immense importance to applied discourse studies, particularly discourse teaching and learning. The book is well-written, well-edited and well-printed. The language is accessible to the average reader.

And the good use of tables, diagrams and pictures in it further enhances its readability. Finally, the contentions in it have potential universality as the author takes into consideration the diverse cultures and situational contexts of their application. However, one should point out that for the top-down approach to work successfully in second language (i.e. non-native) learning situations, it must be preceded by effective grammar teaching. In other words, second language learners, especially in their natural non-native environments, need to have some knowledge of how a language works before they can successfully encounter the discourse in that language. At least they have to make up for the grammar which native speaker learners already must have internalized before coming to school (cf. Akere 1984).

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