Historical Background: Discourse and the Prevailing Approaches to Language Analysis in Linguistics

How can one explain the very late concern in linguistics’ contemporary history for discourse analysis, a topic pertaining so obviously to its field of inquiry? More specifically, what made possible the nearly complete exclusion of discourse-level phenomena in linguistics before the 1970s? The explanations for this strange situation involve the prevailing conceptions of linguistic science and, consequently, the nature and scope of the issues perceived as relevant to language.

Since the 1950s, the two prevailing approaches to language have been structuralism and Chomskyan theory. Although these approaches present, respectively, many different views about language analysis (the discussion of which is beyond the scope of this chapter), they share a central feature that is largely responsible for the unfortunate state of the field of discourse analysis before the 1970s. Following the well-known distinction established by Saussure between langue and parole, both the structuralist and the Chomskyan approaches are (almost) exclusively preoccupied by phenomena pertaining to the realm of langue. These researchers are interested in the internal functioning of grammars seen as nearly closed systems, that is, as systems defined and discussed as largely independent of contingencies observed in everyday language use. Researchers look for regular mechanisms, processes, or rules, especially in the fields of phonology and syntax. The keywords for both these fields are: units, positions, distributions, relations, and changes. For example, in syntax, Bolinger (1952) studies word sequencing in sentences and finds that sentential adverbs show different contrastive possibilities in English according to their position in a clause.

1. Why did you abruptly back away?
   Why did you back away abruptly?

   According to the author, the first sentence asks essentially “Why did you back away at all?”, while the second asks “Why, having decided to back away, did you do it abruptly?” Thus, the first sentence can be contrastive, but only as a whole.
2. Why did you abruptly back away?
   Why didn't you courteously accept as I wanted you to?

   On the other hand, the second sentence is contrastive in either part (back away or abruptly), depending on the location of stress assignment in one of its particular utterances.

3. Why did you back away abruptly when I told you to dart forward abruptly?
   Why did you back away abruptly when I said to do it gradually?

   This sample of analysis taken from syntax illustrates the radically structural approach of language study prevailing during this period.

   Quite obviously, discourse is difficult to categorize within such a framework. Perceived from such a perspective, it is, in fact, characterized by many fuzzy edges that make the possibility of its successful study seem very dubious. First, the study of discourse is closely related to the study of meaning. Second, it is a multileveled object of study. Third, it rests on contextual evidence. Fourth, it is subject to individual (speaker to speaker) variation. Finally, discourse analysis implies a beyond-the-sentence approach. This last requirement was surely the most puzzling for linguists of this period, for whom the sentence was the absolute boundary of language study. Because of all these undesirable characteristics, discourse has been thus generally dismissed as a nonlinguistic entity by a whole generation of linguists.

**The Precursors to Current Approaches to Discourse: Working Against the Stream**

Paradoxically, during this period when discourse was not a popular topic, important initiatives were nevertheless undertaken in discourse-level analysis. These individual efforts, scattered throughout the century, are noteworthy because they directly underlie the subsequent investigation of questions specific to discourse. This section will review briefly some of the most important of these contributions. The major features of this historical background are summarized in Table 1.1, which specifies the aera(s) in which author or theoretical movement to be reviewed contributed most directly to the emergence of present-day linguistic investigation of discourse-level processes.

**Some Innovative Structuralist Approaches**

Vladimir Propp was a Russian scholar especially concerned with the analysis of folktales. His major contribution, produced very early in the century (1928) is, in fact, the first contemporary attempt to build up a framework—a version of structuralism in the present case—really suited for discourse study. This "structural" framework provides systematic and exact procedures for discourse analysis and leads to important insights, particularly on two major points. Propp demonstrates structural regularities across narratives, especially in character features,