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**DISCOURSE NETWORKS IN CLASSROOM INTERACTION :  
SOME PROBLEMS IN COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING**

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## RESUME

Parmi les implications de l'approche communicative en pédagogie des langues, l'une des plus importantes concerne la communication « pédagogique » à laquelle prennent part les apprenants dans la situation de classe. Idéalement, cette communication devrait être parfaitement identique à la communication en situation réelle dont les apprenants cherchent à acquérir la maîtrise. En est-il toujours ainsi ? Pour procéder à cette vérification, aussi bien que pour définir des activités communicatives conformes à l'objectif d'apprentissage, il serait nécessaire de disposer d'un modèle rigoureux et explicite de l'interaction verbale.

C'est la présentation de l'ébauche d'un tel modèle qui constitue la partie centrale de cet article. Ce modèle, utilisé ensuite pour décrire un fragment de communication dans la salle de classe, révèle que le type d'interaction qui s'établit dans une telle situation est loin d'être conforme à l'objectif que se fixe l'enseignement/apprentissage ; et il permet de tirer un certain nombre de conclusions pédagogiques extrêmement utiles.

This paper was given at a seminar on "Communicative Methodology in Language Teaching" organised by the British Association for Applied Linguistics at the University of Bath, in April 1977.

This paper<sup>1</sup> attempts to deal with certain aspects of the relationship between the classroom and the real environment, seen as settings for communicative activity. It is therefore an exercise in contrastive pragmatics. The problems referred to in the title, then, are discourse problems arising from the conflict or tension existing between the *pedagogical* situation (the classroom, etc.) and the *target* situation (the real-life situation in which learners will use their language).

The "communicative" or "functional" approach to language teaching which has become so prominent during the last seven-eight years, has implied and resulted in the development of a number of teaching/learning strategies. These strategies share certain common characteristics : let us consider some of them briefly.

<sup>1</sup> The work on which this article is based has been carried out in close collaboration with Marie-José Gremmo and Henri Holec.

(i) At the most general possible level, they all aim to encourage the acquisition of an L<sub>2</sub> for *communication*.

(ii) Again, and we would claim consequently, such strategies often involve a reduction in teacher-interference. Now this idea of teacher-interference is crucial : it is simply not good enough to gloss it, as is usually done, as "unhelpful intervention" or "unrealistic non-target discourse". This is all very true, of course, but it is only a gloss, a description of the problem - it is not a solution to it. What we need is some way of categorising teacher contributions to classroom discourse (indeed *any* contributions to *any* discourse) in such a way as to know when an intervention is or is not "helpful", or "realistic".

Of course, many teachers are conscientious people, well-informed about such things as register and often talented actors, so that their natural reaction is to claim that they *do* know. But, as has been shown time and again, when it comes to discourse and interactional behaviour, intuition is most definitely not enough, not even the intuition of native speakers.

(iii) A third characteristic common to communicative language teaching strategies, and again one which follows from those already given, is that if we do manage to encourage communication and to reduce teacher-interference, the role of the teacher will change considerably. Here too, we come up against a whole series of problems and considerations : in particular, is the traditional classroom teacher to become the "helper" of Rogerian philosophy and of autonomous learning schemes (Rogers, 1973) ? Obviously, this implies a vast shift in the teacher's role, socially as well as pedagogically. Unfortunately, we do not have time to pursue these considerations either, so let us for the moment try to crystallise them (and to keep them immediately relevant) in the following question : is the teacher's main function to become one of classroom management ?

(iv) Our fourth characteristic is very closely linked with this problem of the teacher's role ; indeed, it is the reverse side of the coin in many ways. It is that communicative strategies imply or necessitate *collaboration with other learners*. If we run our eyes quickly down a list of such activities — role-playing, pairs practice, simulations, games, creative activities, group teaching — this is blindingly obvious. What is perhaps not so obvious is that the responsibility for learning is put back fairly and squarely where it belongs : with the learner.

(v) Finally, most communicative strategies have the effect of preventing teacher-falsification of the target language. By this we do not mean the type of misrepresentation which is based on an ignorance of the language or on a misguidedly puristic approach, although this is still common. Rather, we are referring to the falsification of behaviour (in the widest communicative sense)

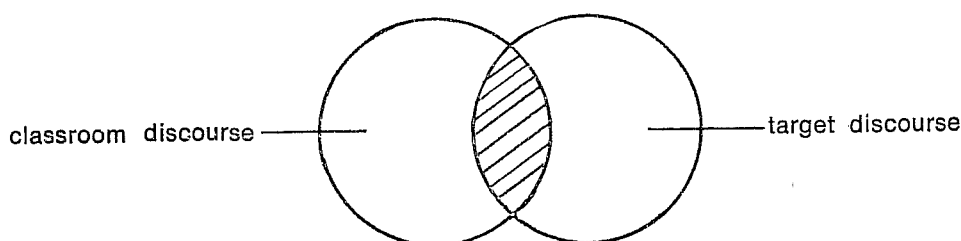
which results from the teacher's very natural, human desire to be understood. Consciously, or more often unconsciously, the teacher develops a very accurate awareness of just what his learners will or will not understand. His language becomes filtered, pre-digested, at all levels : he acquires the language teacher's characteristic of over-precise articulation, of course, but also the selection of certain lexical items and grammatical structures rather than others. An Englishman teaching in France will catch himself saying "bizarre" or "strange", where he might have said "odd" or "funny", or making abnormally frequent use of affirmatives-plus-rising intonation as requests for information. Even more important (because it is usually completely unconscious) is the very strong tendency for the teacher to adopt certain of the students' non-verbal behaviours : given what we now know about the importance of non-verbal communication (NVC) in face-to-face interaction, this must result in considerable distortion of the discourse. The speed with which this kind of NVC-interference takes place is phenomenal : observation of a group of 7 young English teachers arriving in France in September 1976 showed that the majority were using French NVC in English after only two weeks in the country and that all were doing so within five weeks of arrival.

Of course, this type of interference and the discourse distortion it produces is probably much more common in just that context — teaching English as a foreign language abroad. But as I hope to show, there are other types which are widespread, since they spring from *the very nature of classroom interaction*. And again, there is the problem of English for special purposes (ESP), where the teacher may well be ignorant of the discourse type, — in the sense of inexperienced, incompetent — which is required to be taught.

All of these problems combine to make the argument in favour of authentic materials a very strong one. By making use of tape or video-recordings which have been produced for non-didactic purposes, as part of a genuine act of communication, we can expose our learners to examples of the discourse which have undergone the minimum of adulteration and of interference. And as long as our ignorance of the organisation of discourse, of the types and sequences of illocutionary and interactive acts, remains as great as it is, this argument must remain overwhelming.

It seems only realistic to assume that classrooms, groups and teachers will be with us for some time yet, that society will not be "de-schooled" overnight. This being the case, it would be valuable if we had some way, some model, to account for contributions to discourse. This would help us to understand and hopefully improve the situation which I have been discussing, by enabling us to contrast in a more rigorous fashion discourse inside and outside the classroom, as well as making a considerable contribution to ESP and to communicative methodology in general.

It is important not to underestimate the complexity of the problem. But using the schema which Phillips and Shettleworth (1975) put forward we can summarise the situation as follows :



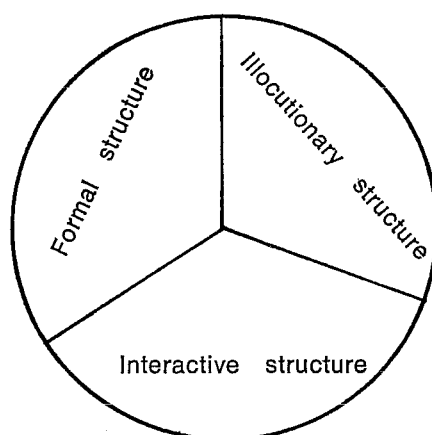
(An aggravating factor here, at least at the theoretical level, is the co-existence of a number of *texts*. It is salutary, for example, to try to count the number of implied texts in a teaching directive such as : " Now we are going to practice with the dialogue 'At the Restaurant' on page 21 ".)

This diagram implies, in what is admittedly an over-simplified way, that the teacher's job is to increase, as it were, the shaded area, the area where the pedagogical discourse and the target discourse coincide or overlap. This implies management. Fine but management is too often, willy nilly, interference. Discourse networks are ephemeral, fleeting, but like the spider's web, they are also highly systematic, indeed they *are* systems. Systems which the teacher's very presence is enough to alter. When we add a term to a system we change relative values and functions of *all* terms in the system. By evaluating, suggesting, correcting, commenting, criticising, managing — that is, by *teaching* — the teacher falsifies or distorts the discourses, and despite this diagram the two are usually so intertwined that it is hopeless trying to pretend that there is no mutual interference. The teacher is in the position of a blind man trying to understand and handle and describe a bubble : in doing so, he destroys it.

What, then, do we mean by a discourse network ? And how will this concept help us deal with the type of problem we have been discussing ? It might be helpful to try to answer this question first by analogy : every reader will be familiar with those photographs taken at night of traffic in some busy city centre, round the Arc de Triomphe, for example. By using a long exposure, the photographer obtains an image where the headlights of individual cars are shown as long lines or streaks. Of course, where the traffic is heaviest we have the greatest number of lines ; indeed, careful examination of the photograph will tell us a lot about the organisation of the traffic-flow, types of vehicle, its distribution, direction, priorities, rules, etc.

In a sense, (a *metaphorical* sense !) this is how a discourse network works. It is a statement of the contributions made by participants in an interaction together with the rules and routes which they follow, their direction, their distribution, their priorities, their rights. But how are we to take the photograph ? We need a model of interaction which will enable us to produce such a description.

Research has been going on at the C.R.A.P.E.L. for some time now directed towards the problem of a discourse model for spontaneous face-to-face interaction. This is not the time or place for a detailed theoretical justification of our model, so I will just outline it briefly. (A fuller discussion is to be found in Riley, 1975, 1976).



#### FORMAL STRUCTURE : (" Realisation ")

The set of message-bearing elements (verbal, paralinguistic, non-verbal) in a situation. These elements have substance and are realisations of various systems and structures whose organisation can be described in terms such as class, units, structure and distribution. The textual function of such elements is described in terms of their internal relations (and without reference to the meaning they carry).

#### ILLOCUTIONARY STRUCTURE :

Here we deal with the illocutionary forces of acts (whatever their realisation) ; inviting, persuading, agreeing, etc. Sequences of these give us illocutio-

nary ("communicative") structure. There is no one-to-one relationship between these acts and units of realisation — they are *not* related at different levels of *delicacy*.

#### INTERACTIVE STRUCTURE :

At this level we describe linguistic organisation in terms of interactional tactics, turns, address, relative distribution of utterances ; sequences of these give us interactive ("discursive") structure. Now, this model can be shown to have considerable advantages :

(i) It integrates satisfactorily NVC. Indeed, one of the main justifications for distinguishing between illocutionary and interactive structure is the existence of sets of non-verbal behaviours whose function is to control the interactive process (turn-taking and address signals in particular), but which have no illocutionary ("speech-act") force ; e.g. informal conversation is in fact highly-structured and it is these linguistic NV behaviours which realise and articulate the structure.

(ii) It enables us in general to deal with the problem of interruption or discontinuity, by distinguishing *places* in interactive structure from the illocutionary acts which occupy them.

(iii) If we take the idea of interactive acts, such as Opening, Response, Closing and combine it with a record of those non-verbal behaviours mentioned earlier which function specifically as discursive and interactional regulators, we have a useful tool — a "camera" in fact, to pursue our earlier analogy — for the description of interactions. Moreover, it is a description which takes into account the fact that not all interactions are dyadic. This is important because up until now interactive discourse models have either been limited to the dyad or they have simply handled interactions involving larger numbers (three or more participants) as if they were just a series of parallel dyads. This has been particularly true, and particularly misleading, in analyses of the language of the classroom where, as we shall see, important discursive privileges of the teacher are masked if the situation is treated simply as a teacher/class dyad. Now, by coding successive contributions to discourse according to which participant is the Speaker, who is the Addressee and who the Hearer, we are able to build up a clear picture of a discourse network. Obviously the best way to clarify this is to take an example. The example in question is only a fragment, a tiny excerpt from a discourse network, only one of the multitude of strands which make up the spider's web. It is a transcript of a recording of about 30 seconds of a class. A very conventional class, although the teacher was in fact eventually aiming at a communicative activity. Here he was preparing a dialogue with his group, the two parts to be taken by Mme. X and M. Z.

- 1 Teacher : Right... the bottom of the page, then... whose turn is it ? Mme X ?  
 2 Mme X : Is my turn ? What-  
 3 Teacher : Is it my turn ?  
 4 Mme X : Is it my turn ?  
 5 Teacher : Good. Yes, I think it was  
 6 Mme X : What means 'the way' ?  
 7 Teacher : Anyone ?  
 8 M. Y : Le chemin, montrer le chemin  
 9 Teacher : Le chemin, right, good  
 10 Mme X : " Can you tell me the way to Victoria Station, please ?"  
 11/12 Teacher : Fine... M. Z ?  
 13 M. Z : " Certainly, it's down there, on the right "

## INTERACTIONAL STRUCTURE :

|         | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 |
|---------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|----|----|----|
| Teacher | S | A | S | A | S | A | S | A | S | A  | S  | S  | A  |
| Mme X   | A | S | A | S | A | S | H | H | A | S  | H  | H  | H  |
| M. Y    | H | H | H | H | H | H | A | S | H | H  | H  | L  | H  |
| M. Z    | H | H | H | H | H | H | A | H | H | H  | H  | A  | S  |

Legend : 1, 2, 3, etc. - turn (" interactional acts") in serial order  
 (each turn may contain several *illocutionary* acts)

S - Speaker  
 A - Addressee (s)  
 H - Hearer (s)

|          |          |          |          |          |    |          |
|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----|----------|
| 1 2      | 3 4      | 5 6      | 7 8      | 9 10     | 11 | 12 13    |
| O R      | O R      | O R      | O R      | O R      | C  | O R      |
| Exchange | Exchange | Exchange | Exchange | Exchange |    | Exchange |

Interaction

Legend : O = Opening, R = Reply, C = Closing (No duty to reply is imposed by the speaker on any other participant, i.e. there is no address).



The most obvious characteristic of this piece of discourse is the teacher's centrality. He is the Paris of centralised France : wherever you want to go, you have to go via Paris. Of course this centrality is one aspect of the problem of teacher-talk. Much shaking of greying locks has gone on lately about the predominance in quantitative terms of teacher talk : but here we can see that this is in fact a direct consequence of his centrality. Whether he likes it or not, the teacher is continually being forced to reply because he is addressed by his students. Getting them to address one another will be a pre-requisite, then, to a reduction of teacher-talk. But this in turn will mean a change in the role and status of the teacher. It is not purely fortuitous that the term " centrality " has been borrowed from the study of group dynamics : here we are able to formalise the discursive correlates of what has previously been regarded as a characteristic of social role.

Of course, the particular communicative acts, the illocutionary acts, which the teacher performs are also part of his role — he is the only one here who has the right to *evaluate* (5), *correct* (3), and *direct* (7). This is very important but most of us are familiar with the problem, which has been the focus of most studies of " the language of the classroom ". It is also something a skilled teacher can do something about, if he so wishes. For the moment, we will concentrate on those discursive features the teacher *cannot* do anything about — because he is there !

Let us run briefly through our passage and look at it in terms of address, of who speaks to whom, and when. As we can see, one of the outstanding characteristics of classroom language is the amount of *control* the teacher has over address : that is, he chooses, — as in (1) — who is to speak next. (The relative degree of *freedom of address* in a classroom is a function of the social *directivity* - another useful formalisation).

In (3) the teacher interrupts Mme X ; interruptions can be classified in discourse terms according to (i) whether they are in- or between- turns, exchanges etc., and (ii) whether the addressee of the Interruptor was the previous turn's S, A or L. The important thing to note here is that we have an in-turn interruption — Mme X is not allowed to finish what she was saying — which is perfectly acceptable in the classroom, i.e. which is part of the teacher's discursive privileges, a reflection of his right to correct, but which would be unacceptable in many other types of discourse.

Once her repetition (4) has been approved, Mme X is permitted to continue. When she does so (6), she addresses the teacher, *not* another member of the group : this apparently trivial point is important from the point of view of a

communicative methodology, since it shows quite clearly that the teacher's presence is preventing just that collaboration between learners which we mentioned earlier as being a necessary component of communicative activities. It is important to note that (8) reveals clearly that she could have got the help she needed directly from another learner, but in fact this does not occur until after the teacher's (7) "general address". This privilege — throwing the discourse open, if you like — belongs exclusively to the teacher : it is *his* course, not theirs !

In (9), as can be seen from the coding, the teacher did not acknowledge the contribution of Mr. Y., he pushes on, which would not be "possible" in other types of discourse. (This is not obvious, as we only have the lexical component transcribed, but other features such as address and key point to the analysis given). Even if we simply classify this as insensitive teaching we are making a valuable point — and making it formally, not merely impressionistically.

In (10) and (11), we see the culminating interference — Mme X addresses her *target* discourse contribution to the teacher and not to Mr. Z., and it is the teacher who closes the exchange with her (another privilege) and then (12) re-opens and redirects the discourse to Mr. Z.

If we remember that the target discourse would have the profile :

|       |   |   |
|-------|---|---|
|       | 1 | 2 |
| Mme X | S | A |
| M. Z. | A | S |

1. Can you tell me the way to Victoria Station, please ?
2. Yes, it's down there on the right.

we can see just how far we have strayed from a truly communicative activity. Of course, it could be argued that the type of teaching exemplified here is a necessary step on the way to the target discourse, indeed, that all we can ever hope to do in a classroom is to *prepare* for communication and that genuine communication can only take place outside, in real life. For the moment, let us just remember that in the vast majority of cases the type of activity analysed is the nearest the learner ever gets to "communication".

This very simple example, then, shows the interference of the pedagogical discourse — the teacher's discourse — in the target discourse. We hope this very brief glimpse of a discourse network will give an idea of how they can be useful in

(i) describing different types of discourse, from inside and outside the classroom ;

(ii) contrasting different types of discourse ;

(iii) formalising such relevant features as *role*

*status*

*formality*

*directivity*

by describing them in terms of the discourse privileges and the discourse behaviours of participants.

Of course, what we have been looking at is only one application, the pedagogical application, of discourse networks. A wide variety of other applications exists, varying from the description of pathological behaviour (much "mental illness" is in fact social and behavioural deviation and has clear discourse correlates), to sociolinguistic studies of various types, to interrogation procedures. But those are not our present concern. What does concern us immediately is how are we, in a communicative methodology, to put the "learner back where he belongs", in all possible senses. How are we to stop the kind of interference taking place that we have been looking at ?

About three and a half years ago, a group at the C.R.A.P.E.L. decided to set up a course in oral English for beginners, based on the functional approach (Holec, 1974). This course has been running for some two and a half years now and has included three groups of between 10 and 20 students, with 4 hours classroom work per week for 25 weeks — it is a 100 hour course in classroom terms. The make-up and methodology of the course was very varied and eclectic, and it included much in the way of traditional teacher/class teaching.

But we also wanted, at least part of the time, to have a much more learner-centred approach, to avoid the kind of interference we have been looking at and to encourage communicative activities as we saw them. We did this by withdrawing the teacher from the those activities, by which we mean that he often actually left the classroom. Indeed one of the main components of the course was a *methodological* training, where learners were introduced to a wide variety of activities and exercises which could be studied alone — whether in class or at home — or, rather, without a teacher.

Inside the classroom, most of the “ communicative activities ” - simulations, games, dialogues, etc., were tried. But the teacher withdrew (in varying degrees, sometimes he was on the touchline, sometimes he was unavailable), leaving the group to their own resources. Pairs practice and group work, for example, in our experience, are far more communicative than “ guided dialogues ” of the type we analysed above. Two further characteristics of our approach here were

(i) Preservation of *sincerity* (i.e. the real-life roles of our learners were respected : old friends were not asked to introduce themselves to each other),

(ii) *Student* creation of dialogues, etc...

Again, as we have seen, authentic materials are a very powerful tool for reducing teacher-interference. We used authentic materials with beginners from the beginning of the course (i.e. from the 4th week, after a general “ cognitive ” presentation and sensitization). Of course, this was for Listening Comprehension and Viewing Comprehension : there was some transfer to production, but that was not the main point, which is that listening skills are also part of oral communicative competence and that they are in general easily studied and practiced without a teacher, after only a small amount of methodological preparation. Students move rapidly from discrimination work to comprehension proper and levels reached in Listening Comprehension were well above levels in traditional courses. We should perhaps point out that we made almost no attempts to provide students with a progression in the Listening Comprehension work : it is not possible if you use authentic materials. On the oral side, the results were neither better nor worse than those of traditional courses, although it is difficult to compare such dissimilar approaches.

Much of what has been said in this article may have seemed pessimistic, but we believe if the present interest in communication makes us re-think the ways in which the teacher can actually help the learning process, a valuable step will have been taken.

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