Discourse Coherence in Nonnative Extended Speech: Implications for ELT

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When students and teacher talk with each other, there is usually a high degree of collaboration and frequent turn-taking. However, when students are required to produce more extended speech, in the form of a description, narration or opinion, there is less support from the teacher and a greater burden on students because they have to package the discourse in a logical and coherent manner. Students, however, often produce extended discourse that lacks coherence due to a number of miscues in the areas of logical connection, discourse markers, syntactic incorporation and lexical specificity. This paper investigates these miscues and shows how they interact with each other to lead to incoherence, through a number of examples. A discussion of the implications for ELT is given.

学生と教師が互いに話すとき、かなりの程度の共同と頻繁な順番交代が見られる。そうであっても、学生がスピーチを延長するように要求されると、(例えば記述、ナレーション、または意見)、学生が談話を論理的で一貫性がある様にまとめなければならなくて、教師からの支援は少なくなり、学生の負担は大きくなる。この種の会話は、学生の口頭運用力の測定として取られるので、学生にとって意義があり、価値がある。しかし、学生は頻繁に一貫性に欠けている延長会話を発する。これは、論理的な関係、談話標識、統語上の抱合および語彙特定性の分野のいくつものキューの間違いによる。この論文は、これらのキューの間違いを調査し、いくつかの例を通して、それらが相互に作用して、どのように非一貫性をもたらしているかを示している。ELTのための含蓄なる議論が与えられる。

Introduction

Day-to-day casual conversation is typically characterised by short turns and frequent turn-taking due to the high degree of collaboration (Clark, 1996) between participants. For students of English conversing with their teacher or other native speakers, this collaboration helps to structure the conversation, and the teacher's contributions act like a 'peg' on which students can hang their discourse. However, when students are required to produce more extended speech in

the form of a description, narration or opinion which is multi-clausal in length, there is less support from the teacher and consequently a greater burden on students to produce discourse which is packaged in a logical and coherent manner. It is at this point that weaknesses in the students' speaking ability are often revealed in the form of discourse that is perceived by the listener as lacking in coherence.

While day-to-day, casual talk is normally taken to be the prototypical discourse act, it is often the case that extended discourse is used in conjunction with this to determine the students' proficiency in the mind of the teacher or the university administration. For example, a teacher may assign a portion of the end-of-semester grade to a student based on a presentation in class, or a student may be required to undertake an oral interview in order to asses suitability for overseas study. Both these tasks would require extended discourse to be produced. In fact, extended discourse is often given greater prominence in assessing language proficiency than it normally would assume given its a-typical nature. Thus, while no one would question the need to be able to deliver casual talk on a day-to-day basis, extended discourse is a feature of language which also needs to be addressed by both the teacher and student, especially since it can often form the basis of the assessment of speaking proficiency. In particular, the IELTS (IELTS, 2002) speaking test and the Oral Proficiency Interview (ETS, 1982), two of the mostly widely used measures of oral proficiency, both require candidates to exhibit extended discourse in their answers.

In this paper, I'd like to show how extended discourse of such kind is constructed and what problems students have in maintaining coherence over the length of the turn when the collaboration and support from the teacher are minimal. I will focus on discourse elicited via interviews and will use Tyler's (1992, 1994) theory of contextualisation cues to analyse several samples of student speech in the area of information grounding, before concluding with some implications for teaching.

The notion of coherence

Pronunciation and grammar are the traditional areas which have received a lot of focus in L2 (second language) analysis while the notion of coherence, and the lack of it in students' speech, has been relatively ignored. One of the reasons for this is the fact that coherence is a difficult notion to pin down. Unlike pronunciation and grammar, which have fairly well defined and documented (though by no means simple) formal L1 codes against which we can judge L2 output, coherence has not been well defined even for native discourse.

Van Dijk (1997: 9), among others, has suggested that coherence is how the meanings of the sentences 'hang together', a somewhat circuitous definition since it merely replaces the notion of coherence with an equally vague concept. Halliday and Hasan (1976) have argued that cohesion, through particular lexico-grammatical ties, acts to bind a text and provide coherence. Ehrlich (1988), while acknowledging the contribution of cohesion to coherence, argues that this is a necessary but not sufficient condition. Other conditions on coherence include semantic consistency and pragmatic relevance. Semantic consistency requires that 'each sentence be consistent with previous sentences in the text' while pragmatic relevance entails that sentences must be 'relevant to the underlying discourse theme of a text as well as appropriate to the context of the utterance' (p.112). Coherence for Ehrlich then 'refers to the unity of a text's underlying semantic relations and their appropriate contribution to the overall discourse theme' (p.111).

Tyler (1992, 1994; Tyler & Bro, 1992) has proposed an integrated discourse framework for coherence using the basic Gricean perspective with Gumperz's (1982) theory of contextualisation cues. She assumes that when listeners are involved in the process of understanding, they are continually making 'constrained guesses about their interlocutor's intentions...' (Tyler, 1994: 245). Tyler claims that:

> … in any communicative situation, participants bring a set of expectations concerning how discourse-structuring cues signal relationships among the expressed ideas... When [these] cues are missing or are used in unexpected ways... [listeners] find a meaningful interpretation difficult to construct, and therefore judge the discourse as incoherent (Tyler & Bro, 1992: 74-75).

She terms the inappropriate use of these discourse-structuring cues as miscues, and notes that incoherence is often the 'the cumulative result of interacting miscues at the discourse level…' (Tyler & Bro, 1992: 71). Examples of these miscues using the author's data will be given in subsequent sections.

Tyler's features

Tyler has outlined and described a number of features at the discourse level which she suggests contribute to coherence in English. These include logical organisation, discourse markers, syntactic incorporation, and lexical specificity among others. The first three I will group under the term 'information grounding'. This encapsulates the idea that when we speak, each successive chunk of information needs to be grounded to the previous discourse, or common ground. If grounding is achieved, then the common ground is expanded slightly to include this new chunk of information. The newly expanded common ground then provides a context for the next chunk of information. (Due to space restrictions, I will not discuss lexical specificity here but see Tyler & Bro (1992) for a review of this.)

For extended discourse, speakers are normally responsible for managing the discourse themselves and ensuring that each unit is appropriately grounded. Listeners in effect take a back seat although they will provide minimal feedback in the form of back-channels and non-verbal cues. For students of English, as the discourse proceeds and the common ground expands, the logistics of this management become more and more complex and the potential for any one chunk of information to be difficult to integrate into the preceding discourse increases. When a chunk is difficult to ground, it not only affects the listener's comprehension at that point in time but can have a knock-on effect in which subsequent information is also difficult to integrate due to the fact that the common ground has not been fully established. While listeners will use inferencing procedures to try and resolve misunderstandings and referential ambiguities, there may come a point when the accumulation of miscues results in a breakdown of communication.

Information grounding

As an example of how information grounding miscues arise, consider the following question /answer pair from an oral proficiency interview:

> *How do you feel about the American troops being in Korea?*
> American many peoples come to Korean. They teach English and business, I agree. We can get

> lot of information from them. Armies I don't
> agree that. <u>But our country have powerful and
> economic develop</u>. We don't need them I think.

The student's extended turn in this case is quite well constructed up until the underlined portion. There are a few grammar mistakes but overall the listener can recover the student's intended meaning. However, as the underlined chunk is delivered, grounding miscues start to appear. First the chunk is introduced with the discourse marker *but* which normally indicates contrastive information. However, in this case, the chunk does not contrast with the preceding chunk but in fact expands on it. Secondly, in some ways it might have been better if the chunk had been articulated after the next chunk in order to bring out its relation with it. A more nativelike renditioning is given below in which the relation between the chunks of information is brought out due to the additional discourse markers *and* the logical organisation.

> In fact we don't need them now because our country
> have powerful and economic develop I think.

At this point it should be emphasised that the reader is currently analysing the discourse 'off-line'. In other words, the reader is able to repeatedly look back and forth through the discourse looking for cues to help establish coherence. If listening to the discourse 'on-line' in real-time, however, the inability to do this and the lack of processing time for inferencing would exacerbate the miscues. For example, the use of the discourse marker *but* to introduce the underlined chunk in the original may appear fairly minor to some readers, but on-line, discourse markers are potentially quite powerful. To give an analogy, suppose we were travelling from Osaka to Tokyo by car and the road ahead suddenly forks. We have it in our minds that we should take the right fork but the sign for Tokyo clearly

points left. More often than not we follow the sign and fork left because we don't expect road signs to be incorrect. And similarly with discourse markers, we are often forced to follow and trust in them, especially when listening on-line (which can lead to 'garden-path' effects).

A second example illustrates how grounding miscues can compound pronunciation errors. Several scholars have noted how pronunciation is a key aspect of L2 comprehension (e.g. Gynan, 1985). In the following example, a student is describing a particular cafe she likes in an extended turn from the IELTS speaking test (see footnote):

> *Describe a restaurant or cafe you like.*
> …Now in China we have the Starbuck coffee
> shop and sometimes I with my friends after school
> we sometimes go to the Starbuck. And we have a
> cup of hot chocolate and we chat, we sometimes,
> we after school we maybe hungry <u>so I think the
> (sandwich) is very (good)</u> in the Starbuck.

On listening to the recording of the interview for the first time, the author was unable to determine the words in brackets (sandwich, good) because they were not well pronounced. On listening to the tape a second time, though, it became clear what the words were. It would be quite simple therefore to assign this miscue to the mispronunciation bracket. However, on looking at the turn in more detail we can see how grounding miscues act to compound the mispronunciation. First, the student introduces the underlined chunk with the discourse marker *so* which immediately suggests some sort of resultative relation with the preceding discourse. However, rather than this, the student makes a topic shift from talking about 'what they do' at the cafe to 'the quality of the food' at the cafe.

Off-line, this shift may not appear so severe since the overall topic is still focused on the cafe, but topic changes of this kind are normally signalled through linguistic or paralinguistic cues such as pauses and /or intonational contours. In this case, however, the pauses before and after the discourse marker did not indicate a topic shift. This unsignalled topic shift acts to compound the pronunciation inaccuracies and the unit is difficult to integrate into the preceding discourse, i.e. it is difficult to ground. A more nativelike renditioning where the topic change is signalled more clearly or the quality of the sandwich is given as background information might have enabled the pronunciation inaccuracies to be resolved, as in the following example:

> …so I choose the sandwich which I think is very good.

Syntactic incorporation

Another of Tyler's features is syntactic incorporation which distinguishes between syntactically complex and syntactically simple chunks of information. In (a) below, the discourse is constructed in a syntactically simple, or paratactic, way:

> (a) The woman lives next door. She is married.
> (b) The woman who lives next door is married.

In this case, the chunks of information are simply juxtaposed with each other and both carry equal weight. A second way to package the information is to syntactically incorporate one clause into the other as in (b). In this case, the hierarchical relation between the two chunks is brought out and the listener takes *the woman is married* to be foreground information and *who lives next door* to be background information to aid referent identification.

Discourse rarely consists completely of one type of packaging, rather it is the degree to which syntactic incorporation is employed over and above the basic paratactic packaging. One common misconception is that spoken language is syntactically 'flat', consisting of chunks of information simply juxtaposed with each other. However, this is not strictly true. Danielewicz (1984) has shown that even in causal speech, 20% of all clauses are 'dependent' clauses, that is, they are syntactically subordinated to or embedded in other clauses. Beaman (1984), working with narratives, suggests that 'spoken narrative is on the whole just as complex as, if not more complex in some respects, than written narrative' (p. 78). Finally, Biber (1988) has shown how in native speech, the interview genre compares significantly with written academic prose and press reportage in the degree of syntactic incorporation it employs.

Tyler has argued that when students of English fail to use syntactic incorporation in a nativelike way, their speech is perceived as 'flat' and an important source of information structuring is lost:

> Heavy reliance on coordinate conjunction and juxtaposition in lieu of syntactic incorporation essentially strips the discourse of important sources of information regarding prominence and logical relationships. (Tyler, 1992)

A number of studies (Tyler, 1992, 1994; Tyler, Jefferies, & Davies, 1988; Liu, 2001) have shown how nonnative speakers have reduced quantities of syntactic incorporation in their spoken output. The conclusion is that students do not bring to the task the resources that the native speaker does for the structuring of information, in particular the highlighting of foreground and background contrast. The example below shows what can happen when this is the case:

What do you think your [shipping] company should do in order to improve its public image? In our company's case I said that our company transport to the customer's cargo from one area to another area by the vessels. (i) And so in that case we can contaminate from the vessel's oil. In that case we can contaminate the ocean. (ii) So our company has been investing the about that prevent pollution. So that case our vessels the has a special facility to prevent the pollution. We have a big money to invest the about pollution, to prevent pollution. So our company try to prevent pollution.

In this example, the student fails to package his thoughts into syntactically 'tighter' units with the consequence that the turn occupies more 'discourse space' to use Sato's (1990) terminology. This occurs in two instances at (i) and (ii). The information could be integrated into syntactically more tighter discourse as follows:

(i) so in that case we can contaminate the ocean from the vessel's oil.

(ii) our company has been investing big money in a special facility to prevent pollution.

Implications

Due to space limitations, it has not been possible in this paper to go into a deeper discussion of the notion of discourse miscues, but I hope the reader has developed a sense of how they arise and the importance of addressing them. The basic thesis is that while day-to-day, casual conversation is taken to be the prototypical discourse act, students at academic level are often called on to produce extended discourse in the form of a narrative, description or opinion, particularly during specific tasks such as interviews. These instances of extended discourse can have value in the sense that they are often taken to be a measure of students' oral proficiency or used to assign grades (more so in many cases than highly collaborative exchanges). Due to the nature of these extended turns, there is less collaboration and support from the teacher and this places a greater burden on the students to package the discourse in a logical and coherent manner. Each chunk of information needs to be grounded with the preceding discourse for the discourse to remain coherent and stay on-track. As miscues in logical connection, discourse markers, and syntactic incorporation occur, these accumulate and often interact with miscues in concurrent linguistic systems (e.g. the phonological system), thus leading to the perception of incoherence on behalf of the listener and sometimes a complete break in communication.

Given the complexity of the miscues and the nature of teaching itself, it is difficult to provide hard and fast rules as to what a teacher should do in class to improve students' competence in this area. However, it would seem sensible to suggest first that we need to give students plenty of opportunities in class to practise delivering extended discourse. It can be quite easy for the teacher to go through a whole lesson eliciting single-clause answers and short turns from students, without much extended discourse ever being produced, thus leading the teacher and students into a false sense of security. But when the 'crutch' is removed so to speak and the teacher pushes the students to extend their speech in the form of descriptions, opinions and narrations, the students' discourse can often lack coherence.

Second, students need feedback on their attempts at extended discourse so they know what miscues are leading to incoherence. This can be a particular problem because discourse miscues are relatively covert and difficult to explain, and the pressure to continue with the class is often so great that teachers avoid such feedback. Compare this to a pronunciation or grammar mistake which, relatively speaking, can often be easily identified and handled quickly by the teacher via the blackboard. Discourse coherence is not a lost cause, however, and teachers can and do design exercises with feedback that help students to raise their awareness of the miscues.

Finally, we need further research into discourse coherence in nonnative speech. There has been a large body of research that has looked into pronunciation and grammatical errors, and indeed quite a substantial body of literature on coherence in native speech, but very little on nonnative English. While I acknowledge the important contribution pronunciation and grammar make toward coherent speech, it is often the case that these are compounded by discourse miscues. Furthermore, teachers can rapidly 'acclimatise' to their students' idiosyncratic styles of pronunciation and grammar soon after they begin teaching in the country. Teachers in Japan quickly acclimatise to the Japanese style, teachers in Thailand to the Thai style and teachers wherever to the local style. What remains are the largely unpredictable and non-systematic miscues in discourse coherence; an area that I hope more teachers and researchers will turn their attention to in the near future.

Footnote

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