

Center for Semiotic Research, Winter Symposium January 2003

Per Aage Brandt

On the dialogical grounding of discourse coherence

The following letter is what I take to be a very coherent text. It is a functional message and belongs to the pragmatic genre of invoices:

Dear PAaB,

[1] We understand how easy it is to overlook a small invoice.

[2a] But the fact is, the above invoice remains unpaid. [2b] And although we know you intend to pay it, I'm sure you can understand that we can't keep sending you our magazine on faith.

[3a] So please use the enclosed envelope to return this duplicate invoice with your remittance. [3b] Do it today!

[4] That way, we can both be sure The New Yorker will continue to illuminate your world each week.

Sincerely,

P. W., Circulation Department¹

In the context of a subscription and the actuality of an unpaid invoice, the coherence of the sequence [1-4] may be established as a replay of an implicit dialogue like the following:

A (the subscription manager): You haven't paid our invoice.

B (the subscriber): Oh, haven't I? Well, I must have overlooked it, I guess.

A: [1]

B: Yes, isn't it.

A: [2a]!

B: Of course I intend to pay it, so there should be no problem. Please have faith in my fidelity. And have a nice day.

¹ The dialogue continues in the P.S.: "Already mailed your payment? Sorry -- our letters must have crossed in the mail. Just disregard this notice."

A: [2a&2b]!

B: So what do you expect me to do?

A: [3a].

B: When do you want me to do this? I haven't got too much time, you see.

A: [3b].

B: Ok then, if I must. But can I be sure this would help?

A: [4].

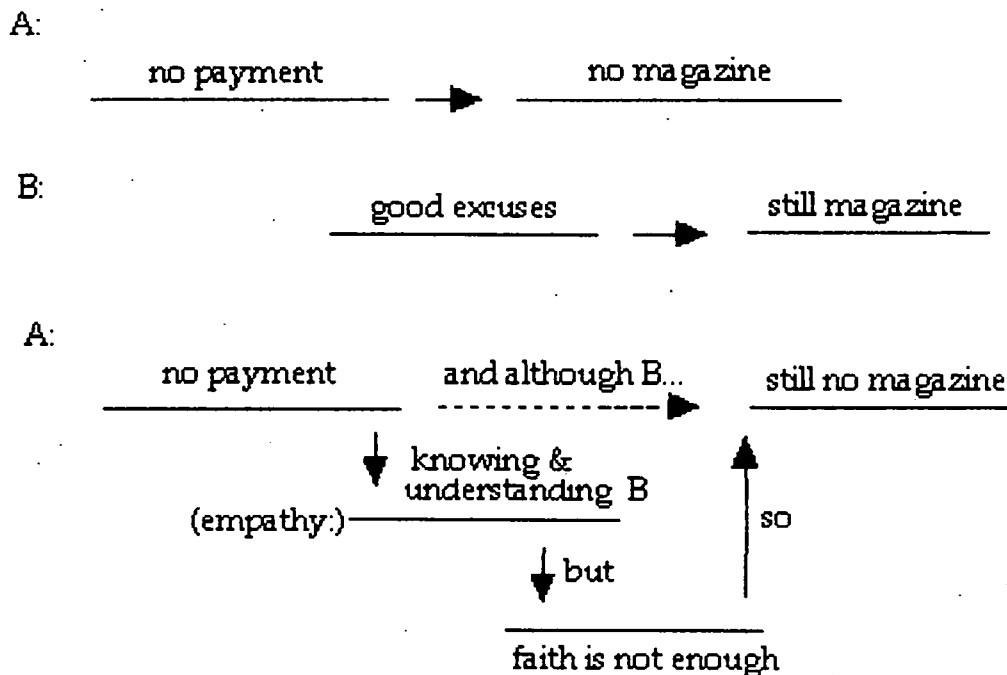
B: What a bombastic way to put it: "Illuminate my world ..." Do you think I am immersed in obscurantism?

The semantic coherence of the text seems to rely on an imaginary, dialogical² process, in which the utterer anticipates the responses of the relevant reader, given that both utterer and addressee define and address each other and the actual situation in terms of a preexisting contract. Theory of mind and empathy should therefore be involved in the active cognitive instances of meaning production responsible for its coherence.

So, in examples like this, discursive coherence might be a matter of 'distributed cognition' — another word for communication. Let's see how this view affects the analysis of transphrastic semantics.

The core of the argument is the information given in [2a]. [1] and [2b] contain concessive statements, the former followed by a conjunction, but, the latter initiated by another conjunction, although. The agent "we" understands... (my forgetting) and knows... (my intention); however, this does not entail that he will overlook my missing payment. Concessivity (something is the case although something else is the case) is apparently an important contributor to discursive coherence; but so is consequentiality (something is the case, and therefore something else is the case), and concessive formulas presuppose the consequential relations they apparently protect against counteractive arguments:

² Cf. Sorin Stati, 1990, Le transphrastique, Paris: P.U.F., Coll. Linguistique nouvelle.



It would be difficult, or even impossible, to account for the dynamics of this argumentative process without referring to the underlying dialogical stances of negotiation (A, B), the dialogical deep structure of the monological surface, so to speak: the 'post-concessive' but occurring after an empathic act and before an act of insistence; the so occurring after the but-initiated act of insistence and before a statement of consequence; the 'pre-concessive' although before the empathic concession and the restatement of consequence. If we think of textual expressions in terms of form-meaning pairings, also called Saussurean sign structures (signifiant-signifié relations), we may obtain an intuitable model by elaborating on R. Langacker's stratification:³

meaning (sé)	III	discourse coherence 'management'	utterance meanings
	II	configurational informations	sentence meanings
	I	objects and concepts	word meanings
form (sa)	-R	I lexical forms (open class)	
		II morpho-syntactic forms (closed class)	incl. intonation
		III rhetorical and compositional forms	incl. gesture

³ Ronald Langacker, 2001, "Discourse in Cognitive Grammar", Cognitive Linguistics 12-2.

The symphonic architecture of linguistic signs according to this view would then let dialogical or enuntiatonal mechanisms of argumentation operate at the overarching (and 'deep') level III, while more local processes of semantic organization configure situational scenarios, episodes, state-of-affairs informations on level II, and phonologically segmental elements appear as hyper-embedded on level I.

Instead of understanding current structures of natural logic such as conditionality in terms of abstract truth conditions or validity spaces shared by protasis and apodosis in a closed propositional framework, we might inscribe them in the dialogical perspective of enuntiation. This move from the working style of analytic philosophy to that of a content-oriented semiotics is immediately rewarding. Thus, in many languages, the if form is also an interrogative conjunction (of yes/no questions); French:

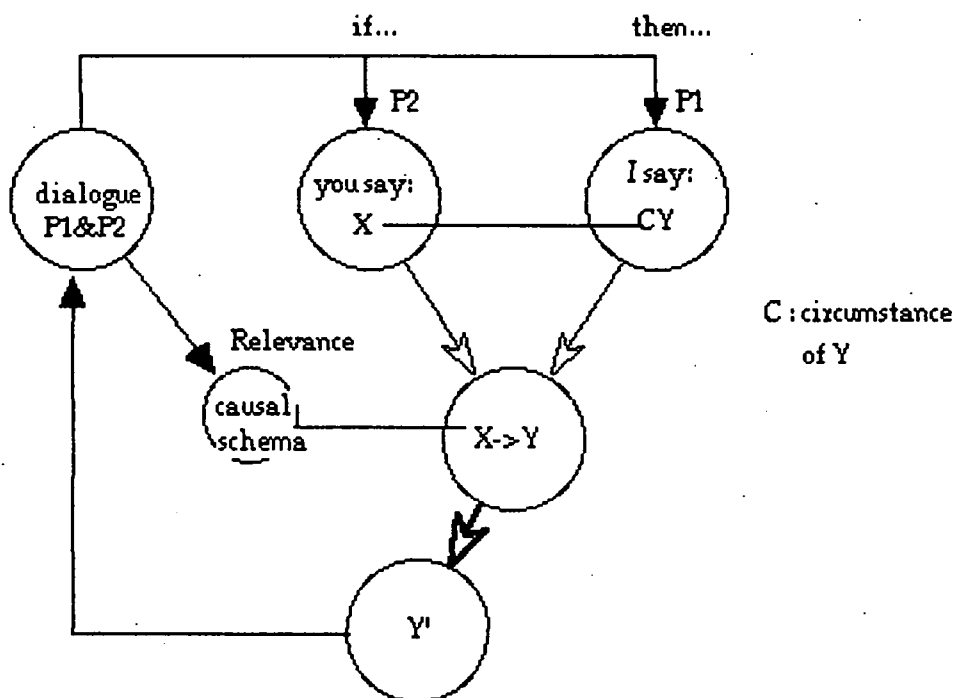
Je ne sais pas si tu es d'accord // Si tu es d'accord, nous pourrions...

I don't know if you agree // If you agree, we could...

The epistemic openness of the protasis would be due to the underlying question: Est-ce que tu es d'accord ? Do you agree? I don't know if you do, but in that case (if so), then I have some relevant information for you... The 'logical morpheme' if is arguably the same in the two syntactic situations, and it must connect them semantically.

So, interrogativity can be seen as the mother of conditionality. The protasis meaning should hypothetically be ascribed to the second person, P2, whereas the apodosis should be written on the first person's account, P1, as it is prototypically manifested by the conditional formulas of promises (if you..., then I...). In general, P1 asks a question, and while P2 is considering what to answer, P1 calculates the contextual meanings of either answer (if yes, then x; if no, then y).

The semantic structure of this principle of semantic coherence between representations is perhaps best modelled by a mental space network:



Example:

If it is snowing tomorrow, I may have to cancel my journey.

P1 already has a reason for thinking of the weather forecast and talking to P2 about it; maybe P2 knows what weather is to be expected, or else is interested in P1's journey and how to affect its probability. But then there has to be a causal motive linking the protasis content to the apodosis content; here, for example the way in which snow can block roads and airports or otherwise make traffic difficult; or maybe P1 will prefer to go skiing instead of travelling.

Mental space networks of this situation-based sort are likely structural contents of level III, as dialogically construed and efficient coherence-creating meanings.

In poetry, the expectation of similar coherence-makers often seems to be strategically opposed. Here is a series of poems by 'language poet' Rosmarie Waldrop:⁴

[A] I'm looking out the window at other windows. Though the pane masquerades as transparent I know it is impenetrable just as too great a show of frankness gives you a mere paper draft on revelations. As if words were passports, or arrows that point to

⁴ Rosmarie Waldrop, 1993, *Lawn of Excluded Middle*, Providence: Tender Buttons. Language Poetry is a label used

the application we might make of them without considering the difference of biography and life. Still, depth of field allows the mind to drift beyond its negative pole to sun catching on a maple leaf already red in August, already thinner, more translucent, preparing to strip off all that separates it from its smooth skeleton. Beautiful, flamboyant phrase that trails off without predicate, intending disappearance by approaching it, a toss in the air.

(2)

[B] All roads lead, but how does a sentence do it? Nothing seems hidden, but it goes by so fast when I should like to see it laid open to view whether the engine resembles combustion so that form becomes its own explanation. We've been taught to apply solar principles, but must find on our own where to look for Rome the way words rally to the blanks between them and thus augment the volume of their resonance.

(6)

[C] My love was deep and therefore lasted only the space of one second, unable to expand in more than one dimension at a time. The same way deeper meaning may constrict a sentence right out of the language into an uneasiness with lakes and ponds. In language nothing is hidden or our own, its light indifferent to holes in the present or postulates beginning with ourselves. Still, you may travel alone and yet be accompanied by my good wishes.

(22)

This style of writing, or 'écriture', a sort of lyrical, absurdist pseudo-prose, relies entirely on our adverbial or conjunctive coherence-makers, or, as we could say, negotiators. In [A], the concessives though, still, and the two comparatives, one factual, just as, the other counterfactual, as if. In [B], three instances of post-concessive but, a consequential so that, and a comparative the way. In [C], a therefore, a comparative the same way, and two concessives, still and yet.

[A] discusses transparency versus impenetrability, and slides between referring to perception and to language: words. [B] uses the saying that 'all roads lead to Rome' and continues the discussion on language: sentences versus words. Is meaning, conveyed by language, transparent, or is it opaque, is it common or private? [C] thinks that 'deeper meaning', comparable to love, is something private, but still communicable, cf. the final 'good wishes'. These texts are clearly intended to include themselves in their reference; is their language then readable (coherent, transparent) when presented out of their private context? Paradoxically, literary texts have no pragmatic addressee, i. e. no specified context of reception, and yet they are generally or universally 'intimistic', especially poetry, in which there is no narrative fictionality interposed as a screen and thus no narrator mediating between sentence meaning and enunciation.

Comparison, or the general semantics of comparativity, may be understood as meeting a P2's request for a key to predication: P1 claims that A is B in respect of C (the pane is impenetrable in some sense, for instance for a bird), and P2 cannot find C and therefore cannot 'see what P1 means'; then P1 explains C by referring generically ('just as...') to some D which is E in respect of F, meaning that F is a good representation of C. In Waldrop's case, the F-C clarification often intentionally leads to deeper obscurity, already because the DEF is deliberately more abstract and less intuitable than ABC and therefore cannot serve as a figurativization of it.

In the maple leaf sentence, an organic object becomes translucent (a variant of transparent) while getting reduced to its 'skeleton': the opaque is the living version, the transparent is the dead version of meaning. The reader is supposed to be seduced by the sensuality of this sentence, so the next sentence is metalinguistic and ironic ([however, that was just, or nothing but, a] 'beautiful, flamboyant phrase...'), before ending in an evocation of emptiness — a general theme of this text series. What is clear is empty, and what is substantial and meaningful is opaque. This much is evident in the style of reasoning of these poems, as their almost explicit poetique.

The Spinozist move of inscribing abstract notions in physical nature is another rather simple technical means, as in the first sentence of [C], where love (a notion) is a part of physical res extensa (expanding in one dimension only...).

Both the latter figure and the vacuum theme are related to the seductive coherence of this poetry by an underlying humor and eroticism of embodiment, as will appear from the end of the first text of the series:

When I say I believe that women have a soul and that its substance contains two carbon rings the picture in the foreground makes it difficult to find its application back where the corridors get lost in ritual sacrifice and hidden bleeding. But the four points of the compass are equal on the lawn of the excluded middle where full maturity of meaning takes time the way you eat a fish, morsel by morsel, off the bone. Something that can be held in the mouth, deeply, like darkness by someone blind or the empty space I place at the center of each poem to allow penetration.

(1)

But, the way, like... A text can achieve coherence without obtaining meaningfulness, i. e. and still avoid being meaningful, if this is an aesthetic ideal. *But* in that case, the transphrastic binding occurs as an erotic intensification of the overarching-underlying dialogical P1-P2 relationship, which then is and has to be entirely imaginary, since the addressee is unspecified — a sort of abstract love-making.

By contrast, this liminal example of discursive coherence shows us that even the least pragmatic text we can find or think of follows the same principles of transphrastic binding as the most prototypical. The problem of coherence may be inseparable from another famous conundrum, namely the identity of an utterance, the oneness of a text, the sameness of discourse. This issue emerges in the context of enuntiatonal polyphony (in Mihail Bakhtin's sense) and cannot be solved by reference to the self-identity of one voice per text, so to speak. Instead it may be suggested and confirmed by semantic observation that it is the 'oneness' of one dialogue, one conversation, one exchange, in brief one and the same on-line communication between persons, that is the fundamental and grounding, truly foundational principle of discourse coherence, as of human empathy and emotional contact, in short, of shared cognition: this is more generally the deep structure of intentional meaning — not a 'stream-of-consciousness' but a piece of shared present.