Semantic and pragmatic miscues in non-native spoken extended discourse

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ABSTRACT

When non-native speakers are required to produce lengthy discourse in the form of a short monologue or extended turn, there is a greater burden on them to package the utterances into a 'tighter' more coherent discourse for the listener. Under these conditions, miscues in specificity and consistency at the semantic level, and relevance at the pragmatic level often accumulate and interact leading to a discourse which can be perceived by the listener as difficult to follow or lacking in coherence. This study analyzes non-native extended discourse produced under such conditions to investigate the nature of these miscues and how they interact with each other at the discourse level. A manipulation experiment was used to test for the psycholinguistic reality of the miscues; an important procedure in discourse analysis if we are to speak with confidence of the validity of the miscues identified on paper. The experiment used a novel technique which allowed for the modification and insertion of features into the spoken discourse as well as their removal. The manipulated discourse was then rated for improvements in coherence against the original sample by a panel of native listeners. Results suggest that these miscues do indeed significantly impair the coherence of the discourse. The patterns of impairment and interaction are discussed in detail.

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1. Introduction

Day-to-day conversation (talk in interaction) is typically characterized by a high degree of collaboration (Clark, 1996) and negotiation of meaning (Foster, 1997) between interlocutors, and exhibits short turns and frequent turn-taking. When speakers are required to produce more lengthy discourse, however, say in the form of an extended turn or short monologue, the opportunities for collaboration and negotiation are largely removed, and there is a greater burden on the speaker to construct and package the utterances into a 'tighter' discourse to enable the listener to build a coherent interpretation. Tyler and Bro (1992, 1993) have suggested that, under these circumstances, certain cues at the discourse level signal relationships among utterances. When the speaker uses these cues in a nativelike way they "serve as a set of signposts that guide the listener through the discourse" (Tyler and Bro, 1992:74). For non-native speakers of English, the additional burden of constructing extended discourse where opportunities for collaboration and negotiation are lacking often results in miscues at the discourse level that lead to a perceived lack of coherence by the listener. As these miscues accumulate, the listener finds it difficult to integrate the utterances into the on-going discourse and they experience something like "a garden path

effect; they find a meaningful interpretation difficult to construct and therefore judge the discourse as incoherent" (Tyler and Bro, 1992:74–75).

The focus of this paper is coherence in non-native spoken extended turns, in particular how miscues at the discourse level accumulate and lead to a perceived lack of coherence. Coherence in non-native discourse has been relatively under-studied compared with native discourse, particularly in spoken monologue, despite the fact that the former can shed light on how the latter is structured. Moreover, most considerations of non-native discourse have focused on errors at the lexico-grammatical level (e.g. James, 1988; Lennon, 1991; Derwing and Munro, 1997; Salem, 2007) and/or phonological level (e.g. Gynan, 1985; Derwing et al., 1998) rather than miscues at the discourse level and how they interact with each other (but see Tyler and Bro, 1992, 1993; Williams, 1992). Furthermore, much of the discussion in the literature has remained at the hypothetical level; the assumption being that miscues identified by the analyst on paper actually have an impact on coherence when the discourse is processed in real-time. This assumption is not always valid, however, and it is the aim of this paper to test for the psycholinguistic reality of the putative miscues using an innovative technique for discourse manipulation.

The model of coherence presented here considers two areas where miscues act to weaken coherence: semantic consistency and pragmatic relevance (Reinhart, 1980; Giora, 1985a). Semantic consistency refers to the need for the internal specificity of utterances as well as the need for utterances to not contradict preceding utterances, while pragmatic relevance refers to the need for utterances to be made relevant to the on-going discourse through appropriate selection of content and proper contextualization. When miscues in these areas arise and accumulate in discourse, there will be a loss in coherence leading to a possible breakdown in communication. The paper will first consider previous research into non-native discourse and describe in more detail the model of coherence being utilized. It will then report on a manipulation study that aims to test for the psycholinguistic reality of miscues identified in samples of non-native extended discourse.

2. Background

2.1. Non-native discourse

There have been many studies investigating the impact of errors on non-native discourse. The error gravity studies of the seventies and eighties resulted in a mixed picture due in part to differing foci and methodological approaches among the studies. Some studies suggested that grammatical errors in non-native discourse are the gravest (Ensz, 1982), others have suggested lexical errors are more serious (Johansson, 1978; Chastain, 1980), while others have identified pronunciation as the most serious (Gynan, 1985). Several researchers have argued that coherence is only achieved through a complex interaction of many factors of which pronunciation and grammar are but two (Gass and Varonis, 1984). Paralleling this argument, several studies have discussed the impact of local versus global mistakes (Burt and Kiparsky, 1974; Albrechtsen et al., 1980; Tomiyana, 1980) although in practice 'global' generally only refers to adjacent clauses rather than higher order discourse. Rifkin and Roberts (1995) provide a useful review of the error gravity studies in which they highlight the need for authenticity and contextualization in the design of studies of miscues in non-native discourse.

More recent studies have considered coherence in extended stretches of non-native written discourse (Campbell, 1998; Wikborg, 1990; Campbell, 1998; Rogers, 2004; Liu and Braine, 2005) and spoken discourse (Tyler, 1994; Tyler and Bro, 1992, 1993; Williams, 1992; Tonkyn, 2000; McAleer, 2008). Tyler and Bro have argued that coherence in discourse is achieved through a "complex set of interacting elements from the linguistic code [which] serve as cues from the speaker to the audience concerning how ideas are intended to be integrated into the discourse" (Tyler and Bro, 1992:74). For them, incoherence in non-native discourse results from miscues in areas such as lexical specificity and logical connection, which includes discourse markers and syntactic incorporation. Williams (1992) has suggested that the use of discourse markers is crucial in the production of comprehensible discourse and that non-native speakers may need to use strategically more overt discourse marking in order to achieve this. Further studies on the use of discourse markers by non-native speakers (Trillo, 2002; Fuller, 2003; Müller, 2005; Fung and Carter, 2007; Liao, 2009) have suggested that non-native speakers underuse them compared to native speakers and often "in a formulaic manner" (Liao, 2009:1315).

2.2. Coherence

Coherence has often been glossed as a property of a text in which the componential parts appear to "hang together" (Van Dijk, 1997:9) though few scholars have attempted to define the construct formally. For some (e.g. Hasan, 1984; Halliday and Hasan, 1989) the notion of coherence is linked to cohesion with the implication being that more cohesive devices result in a more coherent text. Other scholars (e.g. Beaugrande and Dressler, 1981; Green and Morgan, 1981; McCagg, 1990) appeal to the semantic relations underpinning a text's propositions and the mental schemata the hearer brings to the process of interpretation. Other treatments of coherence look towards the relations that hold between segments of text in an attempt to account for their function in maintaining coherence (Mann and Thompson, 1988).

Reinhart (1980) has argued that coherence[1] in discourse is realized through three criteria: connectedness (i.e. cohesion), consistency and relevance:

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[1] Reinhart distinguishes between texts that are comprehensible (i.e. meaningful) and texts that are coherent (i.e. well-formed and cooperative in the Gricean sense). The set of coherent texts is a subset of the set of comprehensible texts.