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Dialogic: Dialogue-based Coherence in Discourse

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Abstract: This short essay intends to show how written monological discourse is driven by implicit dialogue, to the extent that its semantic coherence depends on this underlying 'dialogic'. Three very different examples are discussed – taken from the genres of invoice, prayer, and poetry.

Keywords: dialogic; transphrastic semantics; consequentials; concessives, conditionals, construction grammar.

1. The dialogic of functional prose.

The following letter is what I take to be a rather coherent text. It is a clearly functional message, a comment accompanying an invoice. It is safe to say it belongs to the pragmatic genre of texts, and also safe to add that it constitutes some sort of request:[1]

> *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,*

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[1] The author in fact received this letter; it is reliable data, not an armchair illustration made up for the occasion.

P. W., Circulation Department[2]

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 or underlying dialogue as the following, stipulated, imaginary exchange between sender (A) and receiver (B):

Reconstruction.

Implicit, A (the subscription manager): **You haven't paid our invoice for your subscription on our magazine.**

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

Now A says: [**1** above]

Implicit, interpolated, B: **Yes, isn't it.**

A: [**2a**]!

Implicit, interpolated, 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.**

A: [**2b**]!

Implicit, B: **No, I understand perfectly. So what do you expect me to do?**

A: [**3a**].

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

A: [**3b**].

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

A: [**4**].

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

*

Seen through this creative reconstruction, the semantic coherence of the text [1 – 4] appears to be a dialogical[3] phenomenon; the utterer (A) anticipates the responses of the relevant reader (B), given that both utterer and addressee

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[2] The dialogue continues rather explicitly in the P.S.: "Already mailed your payment? Sorry - - our letters must have crossed in the mail. Just disregard this notice."
[3] Cf. Sorin Stati, 1990.

define each other and the actual situation in terms of a (here, literally) preexisting contract (subscription). Theory of mind, the anticipation of the other's thinking, and empathy, the feeling of the other's emotional state, should therefore be implied in the active cognitive instances of meaning production responsible for its coherence.

In this sense, discursive coherence might be a matter of 'distributed cognition' — another word for communication. Let's see how that 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 concessive conjunction, <u>but</u>, the latter initiated by another concessive conjunction, <u>although</u>. The agent "we" understands... (namely, my forgetting) and knows... (namely, my intention); however, this does not entail that he will overlook my missing payment. *Concessivity* is apparently, and really, an important contributor to discursive coherence; but so is *consequentiality* (something is the case, *therefore* something else is the case), and concessive
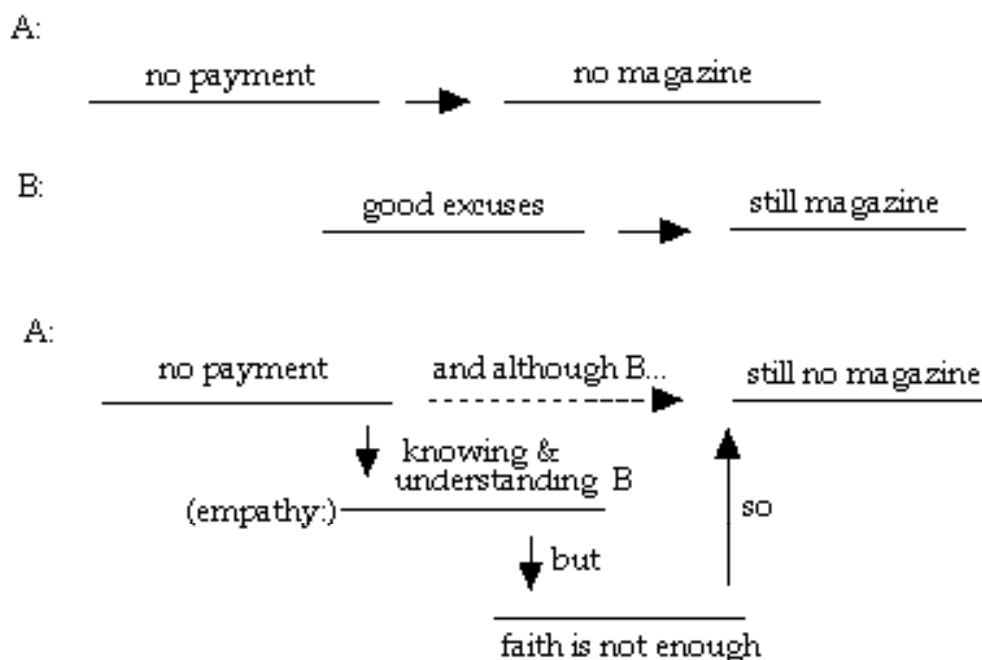
formulas presuppose the consequential relation they apparently protect against counteractive arguments (Fig. 1. **Arguments in dialogue**):

It would be difficult, or perhaps impossible, to account for the dynamics of this argumentative process without referring to the underlying dialogical stances of communication (staging A and B), the dialogical deep structure of the monological surface, so to speak, motivating the *connectives*: the post-concessive <u>but</u> occurring after an empathic act and before an act of insistance; the <u>so</u> occurring after the <u>but</u>-initiated act of insistance and before a statement of consequence; the pre-concessive <u>although</u> occurring before the empathic concession and the restatement of consequence.

X->Y … although Z->negY … but negZ – so still Y.

If we think of textual expressions in terms of form-meaning[4] pairings, also called Saussurean sign structures (that is, signifiant-signifié relations), we may obtain a viable model by elaborating on R. Langacker's stratification (Fig. 2. **A construction model of discourse**):[5]

The symphonic (totally harmonic) architecture of linguistic signs existing according to this view would then let dialogical, *enunciation*-related mechanisms of argumentation operate at the overarching (and 'deep') level III, while more local processes of semantic organization would configure situational scenarios, episodes, state-of-affairs information on level II, and the phonologically segmental lexical surface would appear as hyper-embedded on level I.

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[4] In construction grammar (Goldberg, 1995), all entities (lexemes, phrases, clauses, sentences, utterances) are seen as form-meaning pairings and are called 'constructions'. A problem with this model, whether Goldberg's or mine, above, is that it does not account for the syntactic structure of sentences, unless we explicitly specify that it has to be elaborated at the level Meaning-II. A leveled model allows lexical, syntactic, and discourse meaning to cooperate.
[5] Ronald Langacker, 2001.

Instead of analyzing current structures of natural logic such as *conditionality* only in terms of truth conditions or validity spaces shared by protasis and apodosis in a closed propositional framework, we might thus inscribe these *operators of natural logic* in the dialogical perspective of *enunciation*. Let us briefly consider an example. In many languages, the <u>if</u> form is also an interrogative conjunction (of yes/no questions); French:
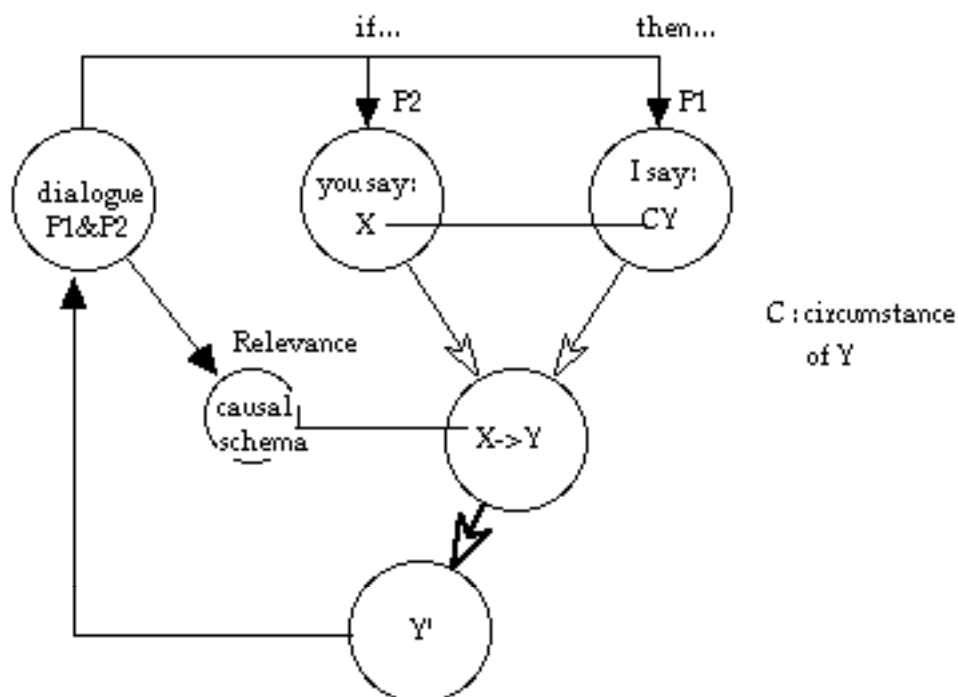
Je ne sais pas <u>si</u> tu es d'accord // Mais <u>si</u> tu es d'accord, alors...

[I don't know <u>if</u> you agree   // But <u>if</u> you agree, then...]

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 <u>if</u> you do, but in that case (<u>if</u> so), then...

So, interrogativity could be analyzed as the ground of conditionality. The protasis meaning would prototypically be ascribed to the *second person*, P2, whereas the apodosis would be in the *first person*, P1, as prototypically manifested by the formulas of promise (**if you**...X, **then I**...Y). P1 asks a question, and while P2 is considering possible answers, P1 calculates the contextual meanings of either answer (if yes [that is, X, by you, P2], then Y [to

be presented by me, P1]; if no [non-X by you, P2], then maybe non-Y [by me, P1]).[6]

The semantic structure of this principle of semantic coherence between representations is perhaps best modelled by a mental space network[7] (Fig. 3. **A Mental Space Network for Conditionality**):

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 is to be expected of the upcoming weather. But then there has to be a *causal* relevance motive linking the protasis content (X) to a circumstance (C) of the apodosis content (Y); here, for example the way in which snow can block roads and take-off lanes, or make traffic difficult, so that the consequence (Y′) will follow.

Mental space networks of this sort are seen, in the framework of this constructional stratification, as formats of the structural contents of level III. They are dialogically construed coherence-making meanings.

2. The dialogic of prayer.

I would like to offer a curious example from American political culture, as it is spread through the internet. One day I received the following anonymous email; American academic colleagues confirmed that it was a seriously meant message from a Republican group (Fig. 4. **Dialogue with the Lord**):

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[6] The question: *Is X the case?* would mean: *I don't know if you think that X is the case.* So *if* contains a reference to P2.
[7] For the mental space network model, see Brandt 2004.

Hi Lord, it's me!
We are getting older and things are getting bad here.
Gas prices are too high, no jobs, food and heating costs too high.
I know some have taken you out of our schools, government and even
Christmas, but Lord I'm asking you to come back and re-bless America.
We Really Need You!
There are more of us who want you than those who don't!

Thank You Lord,

I Love You.

It is straightforward to reconstruct the implied dialogue in this prayer:

Picture of little girl praying.

Girl: Hi Lord, It's me.

[The Lord: Hi, how are you today down there?]

Girl: We are getting older and things are getting bad here. Gas prices
are too high, no jobs, food and heating costs too high.

[The Lord: Well, you know, I abandoned you and punished you (as you
know from my book, I usually do that in such cases), because
you have ignored me grossly. I am extremely angry at you!]

Girl [concessive response]: I know some have taken you out of our
schools, government and even Christmas, (post-concessive clause:) *but*
Lord I'm asking you to come back and re-bless America. We Really
Need You!

[The Lord: We...!? Most of you don't even want me at all. So: no!]

**Girl: There are more of us who want you than those who don't!
[The Lord: O.k. I didn't know that. *If* you are right about the
statistics, I will think about it [Conditional]. You will hear from me.]
Girl: Thank You Lord, I Love You. [Consequential].**

Prayers belong to a pragmatic genre where the second person is categorically silent, and yet analysis of its discourse readily shows the massive semiotic presence of this addressee, particularly in the shape of coherence-making consequentials, concessives, and conditionals as those we have already seen.

3. The 'dialogic' of poetic discourse.
In poetry, the expectation of similar coherence-makers often appears to be actively and strategically opposed. Here is a series of poems by American 'language poet' Rosmarie Waldrop:[8]

[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
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 contemporary poetic style of writing, or 'écriture', a sort of pseudo-prose, relies entirely on the use of adverbial or conjunctional coherence-makers, as, say, *negotiators*. In [A], note the concessives <u>though</u>, <u>still</u>, and the two comparatives, one factual, <u>just as</u>, the other counterfactual, <u>as if</u>. In [B], note the three instances of post-concessive <u>but</u>, and a consequential <u>so that</u>. In [C], we find a <u>therefore</u>, a comparative <u>the same way</u>, and the two concessives <u>still</u> and <u>yet</u>.

    [A] discusses transparency versus impenetrability, and the text slides semantically 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. It asks if meaning is conveyed by language that is transparent or opaque, common or private, etc. [C] muses that 'deeper meaning', comparable to love, is something private but still communicable, cf. my 'good wishes'.

    Of course, discourse coherence in 'language poetry' is a liminal case. This form of poetry exploits – sometimes with great mastery, I think, as in these examples – the dynamics of dialogical, intersubjective, face-to-face oriented communication patterns as an ephemeral and precarious coherence-creating force.

    The human mind works and thinks in 'pulses', in rhythmically delivered *quanta* (portions) of utterance-like units that are approximately

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8 Rosmarie Waldrop, 1993, *Lawn of Excluded Middle*, Providence: Tender Buttons.

sentence-compatible. This means that its flows of thinking and of discourse are flows of such minimal quanta. The advantage of this pulsational mental format is that it opens opportunities for the *other* to kick in and respond or react between any two pulses – as we have seen in the initial, trivial example, again in the simulated prayer, and even in the final, less-than-trivial, poetic example, where the implicit intervention of the reading *other*, the enunciative instance of the *second person*, is the core engine of the text.

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