

## TRANSCRIPTION CONVENTIONS

The general issue of what a transcription represents is considered at length in 1.2. In the transcriptions we present in this book, a variable amount of detail is included from one to the next, for the straightforward reason that different extracts are studied for different purposes.

In the transcription of spoken data we always attempt to record as faithfully as possible what was said and we have avoided 'tidying up' the language used. Consequently some apparently ungrammatical forms, as well as occasional dialect forms, appear in several extracts. In addition, there are examples of repetition, hesitation, and incomplete sentences commonly found in transcripts of spoken data.

The occurrence of short pauses is marked by - , longer pauses by + , and extended pauses by ++ . A detailed discussion of pausing is presented in 5.1. In the intonational representations which accompany some extracts, a simple three-line stave is used. The lines of the stave represent the top, mid and low points of the speaker's pitch range (for a detailed discussion of intonational representation, see Brown, Currie & Kenworthy, 1980).

## I

### Introduction: linguistic forms and functions

#### 1.1 The functions of language

The analysis of **discourse** is, necessarily, the analysis of language in use. As such, it cannot be restricted to the description of linguistic forms independent of the purposes or functions which those forms are designed to serve in human affairs. While some linguists may concentrate on determining the formal properties of a language, the discourse analyst is committed to an investigation of what that language is used for. While the formal approach has a long tradition, manifested in innumerable volumes of grammar, the functional approach is less well documented. Attempts to provide even a general set of labels for the principal functions of language have resulted in vague, and often confusing, terminology. We will adopt only two terms to describe the major functions of language and emphasise that this division is an analytic convenience. It would be unlikely that, on any occasion, a natural language utterance would be used to fulfil only one function, to the total exclusion of the other. That function which language serves in the expression of 'content' we will describe as **transactional**, and that function involved in expressing social relations and personal attitudes we will describe as **interactional**. Our distinction, 'transactional / interactional', stands in general correspondence to the functional dichotomies - 'representative / expressive', found in Bühler (1934), 'referential / emotive' (Jakobson, 1960), 'ideational / interpersonal' (Halliday, 1970b) and 'descriptive / social-expressive' (Lyons, 1977).

##### 1.1.1 *The transactional view*

Linguists and linguistic philosophers tend to adopt a limited approach to the functions of language in society. While they

frequently acknowledge that language may be used to perform many communicative functions, they nonetheless make the general assumption that the most important function is the communication of information. Thus Lyons (1977: 32) observes that the notion of communication is readily used 'of feelings, moods and attitudes' but suggests that he will be primarily interested in 'the intentional transmission of factual, or propositional, information'. Similarly Bennett (1976: 5) remarks 'it seems likely that communication is primarily a matter of a speaker's seeking either to inform a hearer of something or to enjoin some action upon him'.

The value of the use of language to transmit information is well embedded in our cultural mythology. We all believe that it is the faculty of language which has enabled the human race to develop diverse cultures, each with its distinctive social customs, religious observances, laws, oral traditions, patterns of trading, and so on. We all believe, moreover, that it is the acquisition of written language which has permitted the development within some of these cultures of philosophy, science and literature (see Goody, 1977). We all believe that this development is made possible by the ability to transfer information through the use of language, which enables man to utilise the knowledge of his forebears, and the knowledge of other men in other cultures.

We shall call the language which is used to convey 'factual or propositional information' *primarily transactional language*. In primarily transactional language we assume that what the speaker (or writer) has primarily in mind is the efficient transference of information. Language used in such a situation is primarily 'message oriented'. It is important that the recipient gets the informative detail correct. Thus if a policeman gives directions to a traveller, a doctor tells a nurse how to administer medicine to a patient, a householder puts in an insurance claim, a shop assistant explains the relative merits of two types of knitting wool, or a scientist describes an experiment, in each case it matters that the speaker should make what he says (or writes) clear. There will be unfortunate (even disastrous) consequences in the real world if the message is not properly understood by the recipient.

### 1.1.2 *The interactional view*

Whereas linguists, philosophers of language and psycho-

linguists have, in general, paid particular attention to the use of language for the transmission of 'factual or propositional information', sociologists and sociolinguists have been particularly concerned with the use of language to establish and maintain social relationships. In sociological and anthropological literature the *phatic* use of language has been frequently commented on – particularly the conventional use of language to open talk-exchanges and to close them. Conversational analysts have been particularly concerned with the use of language to negotiate role-relationships, peer-solidarity, the exchange of turns in a conversation, the saving of face of both speaker and hearer (cf. Labov, 1972a; Brown and Levinson, 1978; Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson, 1974; Lakoff, 1973). It is clearly the case that a great deal of everyday human interaction is characterised by the primarily interpersonal rather than the primarily transactional use of language. When two strangers are standing shivering at a bus-stop in an icy wind and one turns to the other and says 'My goodness, it's cold', it is difficult to suppose that the primary intention of the speaker is to convey information. It seems much more reasonable to suggest that the speaker is indicating a readiness to be friendly and to talk. Indeed a great deal of ordinary everyday conversation appears to consist of one individual commenting on something which is present to both him and his listener. The weather is of course the most quoted example of this in British English. However a great deal of casual conversation contains phrases and echoes of phrases which appear more to be intended as contributions to a conversation than to be taken as instances of information-giving. Thus a woman on a bus describing the way a mutual friend has been behaving, getting out of bed too soon after an operation, concludes her turn in the conversation by saying:

Aye, she's an awfy woman. (awfy = Sc awful)

This might be taken as an informative summary. Her neighbour then says reflectively (having been supportively uttering *aye, aye* throughout the first speaker's turn):

Aye, she's an awfy woman.

Pirsig (1976: 313) remarks of such a conversation: 'the conversation's pace intrigues me. It isn't intended to go anywhere, just fill

the time of day . . . on and on and on with no point or purpose other than to fill the time, like the rocking of a chair.'

What seems to be primarily at issue here is the sharing of a common point of view. Brown & Levinson point out the importance for social relationships of establishing common ground and agreeing on points of view, and illustrate the lengths to which speakers in different cultures will go to maintain an appearance of agreement, and they remark 'agreement may also be stressed by *repeating* part or all of what the preceding speaker has said' (1978: 117).

Whereas, as we shall note, written language is, in general, used for primarily transactional purposes, it is possible to find written genres whose purpose is not primarily to inform but to maintain social relationships - 'thank you' letters, love letters, games of consequences, etc.

## 1.2 Spoken and written language

### 1.2.1 Manner of production

From the point of view of production, it is clear that spoken and written language make somewhat different demands on language-producers. The speaker has available to him the full range of 'voice quality' effects (as well as facial expression, postural and gestural systems). Armed with these he can always override the effect of the words he speaks. Thus the speaker who says 'I'd really like to', leaning forward, smiling, with a 'warm, breathy' voice quality, is much more likely to be interpreted as meaning what he says, than another speaker uttering the same words, leaning away, brow puckered, with a 'sneering, nasal' voice quality. These paralinguistic cues are denied to the writer. We shall generally ignore paralinguistic features in spoken language in this book since the data we shall quote from is spoken by co-operative adults who are not exploiting paralinguistic resources against the verbal meanings of their utterances but are, rather, using them to reinforce the meaning.

Not only is the speaker controlling the production of communicative systems which are different from those controlled by the writer, he is also processing that production under circumstances which are considerably more demanding. The speaker must monitor what it is that he has just said, and determine whether it

matches his intentions, while he is uttering his current phrase and monitoring that, and simultaneously planning his next utterance and fitting that into the overall pattern of what he wants to say and monitoring, moreover, not only his own performance but its reception by his hearer. He has no permanent record of what he has said earlier, and only under unusual circumstances does he have notes which remind him what he wants to say next.

The writer, on the contrary, may look over what he has already written, pause between each word with no fear of his interlocutor interrupting him, take his time in choosing a particular word, even looking it up in the dictionary if necessary, check his progress with his notes, reorder what he has written, and even change his mind about what he wants to say. Whereas the speaker is under considerable pressure to keep on talking during the period allotted to him, the writer is characteristically under no such pressure. Whereas the speaker knows that any words which pass his lips will be heard by his interlocutor and, if they are not what he intends, he will have to undertake active, public 'repair', the writer can cross out and rewrite in the privacy of his study.

There are, of course, advantages for the speaker. He can observe his interlocutor and, if he wishes to, modify what he is saying to make it more accessible or acceptable to his hearer. The writer has no access to immediate feedback and simply has to imagine the reader's reaction. It is interesting to observe the behaviour of individuals when given a choice of conducting a piece of business in person or in writing. Under some circumstances a face-to-face interaction is preferred but, in others, for a variety of different reasons, the individual may prefer to conduct his transaction in writing. Whereas in a spoken interaction the speaker has the advantage of being able to monitor his listener's minute-by-minute reaction to what he says, he also suffers from the disadvantage of exposing his own feelings ('leaking'; Ekman & Friesen, 1969) and of having to speak clearly and concisely and make immediate response to whichever way his interlocutor reacts.

### 1.2.2 The representation of discourse: texts

So far we have considered in very general terms some of the differences in the manner of production of writing and speech. Before we go on to discuss some of the ways in which the forms of

speech and writing differ, we shall consider, in the next two sections, some of the problems of representing written and spoken language. We shall place this within a general discussion of what it means to represent 'a text'. We shall use **text** as a technical term, to refer to the verbal record of a communicative act. (For another approach to text cf. discussion in Chapter 6.)

### 1.2.3 Written texts

The notion of 'text' as a printed record is familiar in the study of literature. A 'text' may be differently presented in different editions, with different type-face, on different sizes of paper, in one or two columns, and we still assume, from one edition to the next, that the different presentations all represent the same 'text'. It is important to consider just what it is that is 'the same'. Minimally, the words should be the same words, presented in the same order. Where there are disputed readings of texts, editors usually feel obliged to comment on the crux; so of Hamlet's

O, that this too too sullied flesh would melt

(1.ii.129)

Dover Wilson makes it clear that this is an interpretation, since the second Quarto gives 'too too sallied' and the first Folio 'too too solid' (Dover Wilson, 1934). Even where there is no doubt about the identity of words and their correct sequence, replicating these alone does not guarantee an adequate representation of a text. Consider the following extract of dialogue from *Pride and Prejudice*:

'Mr. Bennet, how can you abuse your own children in such a way? You take delight in vexing me. You have no compassion on my poor nerves.'

'You mistake me, my dear. I have a high respect for your nerves. They are my old friends. I have heard you mention them with consideration these twenty years at least.'

It is clear that more than simply reproducing the words in their correct order is required. It is necessary to replicate punctuation conventions, as well as the lineation which indicates the change of speaker. The extract reads as gobbledygook if it is read as a speech by one individual. An adequate representation of a text must assign speeches to the correct characters, sentences to the correct para-

graphs, and paragraphs to the correct chapters. The author's organisation and staging of his work must be preserved.

In a piece of expository prose, the author's indication of the development of the argument contributes to the reader's experience of the text. Thus titles, chapter headings, sub-divisions and sub-headings all indicate to the reader how the author intends his argument to be chunked. The detail of lineation rarely matters in expository or descriptive prose. However it clearly becomes crucial in the reproduction of poetry. The work of those seventeenth-century poets who created poems in the shape of diamonds or butterflies would be largely incomprehensible if the form were not preserved.

The notion of 'text' reaches beyond the reproduction of printed material in some further printed form. A letter, handwritten in purple ink with many curlicues, may have its text reproduced in printed form. Similarly, neutral printed versions may be produced of handwritten shopping lists, slogans spray-painted on to hoardings, and public notices embossed on metal plates. In each case the 'text' will be held to have been reproduced if the words, the punctuation and, where relevant, the lineation are reproduced accurately.

Where the original text exploits typographical variety, a text reproduced in one type-face may lack some of the quality of the original. An obvious example is a newspaper item which may exploit several different type-faces, different sizes of type and a particular shape of lay-out. It is interesting to observe that publishers regularly reproduce conscious manipulation of the written medium on the part of the writer. Thus Jane Austen's expression of contrast is reproduced by publishers in italics:

'Nay,' said Elizabeth, 'this is not fair. *You* wish to think all the world respectable, and are hurt if I speak ill of any body. *I* only want to think you *perfect* . . .'

Similarly Queen Victoria's use of underlining in her handwritten journal is represented by her publishers in the printed version with an italic type-face to represent the emphasis she wishes to indicate when writing of Lord Melbourne:

he gave me *such* a kind, and I may say, *fatherly* look  
(Thursday, 28 June 1838)

Where the writer is deliberately exploiting the resources of the written medium, it seems reasonable to suggest that that manipulation constitutes part of the text.

A further illustration of this is to be found in the conventions governing spelling. In general we assume that words have a standardised spelling in British English. The fact of the standardisation enables authors to manipulate idiosyncratic spelling to achieve special effects. Thus in *Winnie-the-Pooh* the publishers reproduce the notice outside Owl's house in one inset line, using capitals, and with the author's own spelling:

PLEZ CNOKE IF AN RNSR IS NOT REQID

The point that the author makes with this particular spelling would be lost if the words were reproduced in their standard form. It might then be claimed that such a form of the text was incomplete or inadequate, because the point which the author wishes to make is no longer accessible from the written text. Indeed the importance of the correct citing of an author's spelling is regularly marked by the insertion of *sic* into a citation by a second author who wishes to disclaim responsibility for an aberrant spelling.

We have so far been making the simplifying assumption that it is clear, in all cases, what the original text consists of. Where handwritten texts are at issue, it is often the case that the individual reproducing the text in a printed version has to make a considerable effort of interpretation to assign a value to some of the less legible words. In literature, as we have remarked already, uncertainty may give rise to cruces, to disputed texts. In letters, prescriptions, shopping lists, school essays, the reader normally pushes through a once-for-all interpretation of a text which may never be read again. It must be clear however, that a printed version of a handwritten text is, in an important sense, an interpretation. This is particularly clear in the handwritten attempts of very young children where the adult is obliged to assign each large painstakingly formed letter token to a particular type of letter, which he may then re-interpret in the light of the larger message. Thus we have before us a page with a drawing of a large animal (reported to be a lion) and a table with a goldfish bowl on it. The five-year-old writes below what might be transliterated as:

1. the lion was the fish to ti it
2. the cat wants to get dwon the steis
3. with qwt to dsthbb thelion

A possible *interpretation* of the text thus represented might be:

The lion wants the fish, to eat it. The cat wants to get down the stairs without to disturb the lion.

The transliteration of the original with *qwt*, in line 3, reasonably accurately represents the first letter (which might also be represented as a figure nine if nine has a straight back stroke). A more charitable and *interpretive* transliteration would render it as *a* (i.e. 'unhatted' *a* with a long backstroke ( $\grave{a}$ ). We shall return to the problem of the interpretive work of the reader / listener in identifying the words which constitute the text, in the next section.

#### 1.2.4 Spoken texts

The problems encountered with the notion of 'text' as the verbal record of a communicative act become a good deal more complex when we consider what is meant by spoken 'text'. The simplest view to assume is that a tape-recording of a communicative act will preserve the 'text'. The tape-recording may also preserve a good deal that may be extraneous to the text – coughing, chairs creaking, buses going past, the scratch of a match lighting a cigarette. We shall insist that these events do not constitute part of the text (though they may form part of the relevant context, cf. Chapter 2).

In general the discourse analyst works with a tape-recording of an event, from which he then makes a written transcription, annotated according to his interests on a particular occasion – transcriptions of the sort which will appear in this book. He has to determine what constitutes the verbal event, and what form he will transcribe it in. Unless the analyst produces a fine-grained phonetic transcription (which very few people would be able to read fluently) details of accent and pronunciation are lost. In general, analysts represent speech using normal orthographic conventions. The analyst may hear an utterance which might be transcribed phonemically as / greipbrɪn /. Is he to render this orthographically as *grape britain*? Hardly. He will interpret what he hears and normalise to the

conventional orthographic form *Great Britain* inserting conventional word boundaries in the orthographic version which do not, of course, exist in the acoustic signal. If he hears a form / gənə /, is he to render this in the orthography as *gonna* (which for some readers may have a peculiarly American association) or *gointuh* or *going to*? The problem is a very real one, because most speakers constantly simplify words phonetically in the stream of speech (see Brown, 1977: ch. 4). If the analyst normalises to the conventional written form, the words take on a formality and specificity which necessarily misrepresent the spoken form.

Problems with representing the segmental record of the words spoken pale into insignificance compared with the problems of representing the suprasegmental record (details of intonation and rhythm). We have no standard conventions for representing the paralinguistic features of the utterance which are summarised as 'voice quality', yet the effect of an utterance being said kindly and sympathetically is clearly very different from the effect if it is said brutally and harshly. Similarly it is usually possible to determine from a speaker's voice his or her sex, approximate age and educational status, as well as some aspects of state of health and personality (see Abercrombie, 1968; Laver, 1980). It is not customary to find any detail relating to these indexical features of the speaker in transcriptions by discourse analysts. In general, too, rhythmic and temporal features of speech are ignored in transcriptions; the rhythmic structure which appears to bind some groups of words more closely together than others, and the speeding up and slowing down of the overall pace of speech relative to the speaker's normal pace in a given speech situation, are such complex variables that we have very little idea how they are exploited in speech and to what effect (but, cf. Butterworth, 1980). It seems reasonable to suggest, though, that these variables, together with pause and intonation, perform the functions in speech that punctuation, capitalisation, italicisation, paragraphing etc. perform in written language. If they constitute part of the textual record in written language, they should be included as part of the textual record in spoken language. If it is relevant to indicate Queen Victoria's underlining, then it is surely also relevant to indicate, for example, a speaker's use of high pitch and loudness to indicate emphasis.

The response of most analysts to this complex problem is to present their transcriptions of the spoken text using the conventions of the written language. Thus Cicourel (1973) reproduces three utterances recorded in a classroom in the following way:

1. Ci: Like this?
2. T: Okay, yeah, all right, now . . .
3. Ri: *Now* what are we going to do?

In 1 and 3 we have to assume that the ? indicates that the utterance functions as a question – whether it is formally marked by, for instance, rising intonation in the case of 1, we are not told. Similarly the status of commas in the speech of the T (each) is not made explicit – presumably they are to indicate pauses in the stream of speech, but it may be that they simply indicate a complex of rhythmic and intonational cues which the analyst is responding to. What must be clear in a transcript of this kind is that a great deal of interpretation by the analyst has gone on before the reader encounters this 'data'. If the analyst chooses to italicise a word in his transcription to indicate, for example, the speaker's high pitch and increased loudness, he has performed an interpretation on the acoustic signal, an interpretation which, he has decided, is in effect equivalent to a writer's underlining of a word to indicate emphasis. There is a sense, then, in which the analyst is creating the text which others will read. In this creation of the written version of the spoken text he makes appeal to conventional modes of interpretation which, he believes, are shared by other speakers of the language.

It must be further emphasised that, however objective the notion of 'text' may appear as we have defined it ('the verbal record of a communicative act'), the perception and interpretation of each text is essentially subjective. Different individuals pay attention to different aspects of texts. The content of the text appeals to them or fits into their experience differently. In discussing texts we idealise away from this variability of the experiencing of the text and assume what Schutz has called 'the reciprocity of perspective', whereby we take it for granted that readers of a text or listeners to a text share the same experience (Schutz, 1953). Clearly for a great

deal of ordinary everyday language this assumption of an amount of overlap of point of view sufficient to allow mutual comprehension is necessary. From time to time however we are brought to a halt by different interpretations of 'the same text'. This is particularly the case when critical attention is being focussed on details of spoken language which were only ever intended by the speaker as ephemeral parts, relatively unimportant, of the working-out of what he wanted to say. It seems fair to suggest that discourse analysis of spoken language is particularly prone to over-analysis. A text frequently has a much wider variety of interpretations imposed upon it by analysts studying it at their leisure, than would ever have been possible for the participants in the communicative interaction which gives rise to the 'text'. Once the analyst has 'created' a written transcription from a recorded spoken version, the written text is available to him in just the way a literary text is available to the literary critic. It is important to remember, when we discuss spoken 'texts', the transitoriness of the original.

It must be clear that our simple definition of 'text' as 'the verbal record of a communicative act' requires at least two hedges:

- (i) the representation of a text which is presented for discussion may in part, particularly where the written representation of a spoken text is involved, consist of a prior analysis (hence interpretation) of a fragment of discourse by the discourse analyst presenting the text for consideration
- (ii) features of the original production of the language, for example shaky handwriting or quavering speech, are somewhat arbitrarily considered as features of the text rather than features of the context in which the language is produced.

#### 1.2.5 *The relationship between speech and writing*

The view that written language and spoken language serve, in general, quite different functions in society has been forcefully propounded, hardly surprisingly, by scholars whose main interest lies in anthropology and sociology. Thus Goody & Watt (1963) and Goody (1977) suggest that analytic thinking

followed the acquisition of written language 'since it was the setting down of speech that enabled man clearly to separate words, to manipulate their order and to develop syllogistic forms of reasoning' (Goody, 1977: 11). Goody goes on to make even larger claims about the ways in which the acquisition of writing, which permits man to reflect upon what he has thought, has permitted the development of cognitive structures which are not available to the non-literate (cf. also the views of Vygotsky, 1962). He examines the use of 'figures of the written word' in various cultures, particularly the 'non-speech uses of language' which develop systems of classification like lists, formulae, tables and 'recipes for the organisation and development of human knowledge' (1977: 17).

Goody suggests that written language has two main functions: the first is the storage function which permits communication over time and space, and the second is that which 'shifts language from the oral to the visual domain' and permits words and sentences to be examined out of their original contexts, 'where they appear in a very different and highly "abstract" context' (1977: 78).

It seems reasonable to suggest that, whereas in daily life in a literate culture, we use speech largely for the establishment and maintenance of human relationships (primarily interactional use), we use written language largely for the working out of and transference of information (primarily transactional use). However, there are occasions when speech is used for the detailed transmission of factual information. It is noteworthy, then, that the recipient often writes down the details that he is told. So a doctor writes down his patient's symptoms, an architect writes down his client's requirements, Hansard records the proceedings of the British Parliament, we write down friends' addresses, telephone numbers, recipes, knitting patterns, and so on. When the recipient is not expected to write down the details, it is often the case that the speaker repeats them sometimes several times over. Consider the typical structure of a news broadcast which opens with the 'headlines' - a set of summary statements - which are followed by a news item that consists of an expansion and repetition of the first headline, in which is embedded a comment from 'our man on the spot' that recapitulates the main points again, then, at the end of the broadcast, there is a repetition of the set of headlines. There is a general expectation that people will not remember detailed facts

correctly if they are only exposed to them in the spoken mode, especially if they are required to remember them over an extended period of time. This aspect of communication is obviously what written language is supremely good at, whether for the benefit of the individual in remembering the private paraphernalia of daily life, or for the benefit of nations in establishing constitutions, laws and treaties with other nations.

The major differences between speech and writing derive from the fact that one is essentially transitory and the other is designed to be permanent. It is exactly this point which D. J. Enright makes in the observation that 'Plato may once have thought more highly of speech than of writing, but I doubt he does now!' (Review in *The Sunday Times*, 24 January 1982).

#### 1.2.6 Differences in form between written and spoken language

It is not our intention here to discuss the many different forms of spoken language which can be identified even within one geographical area like Britain. Clearly there are dialectal differences, accent differences, as well as 'register' differences depending on variables like the topic of discussion and the roles of the participants (see e.g. Trudgill, 1974 and Hudson, 1980 for discussion of these sorts of differences). There is however, one further distinction which is rarely noted, but which it is important to draw attention to here. That is the distinction between the speech of those whose language is highly influenced by long and constant immersion in written language forms, and the speech of those whose language is relatively uninfluenced by written forms of language. It is of course the case that it is the speech of the first set whose language tends to be described in descriptions of the language (grammars), since descriptions are typically written by middle-aged people who have spent long years reading written language. In particular situations the speech of, say, an academic, particularly if he is saying something he has said or thought about before, may have a great deal in common with written language forms. For the majority of the population, even of a 'literate' country, spoken language will have very much less in common with the written language. This, again, is a point appreciated by Goody: 'Some individuals spend more time with the written language than they do with the spoken. Apart from the effects on their own

personalities . . . what are the effects on language? How do written languages differ from spoken ones?' (1977: 124). In the discussion which follows we shall draw a simplistic distinction between spoken and written language which takes highly literate written language as the norm of written language, and the speech of those who have not spent many years exposed to written language (a set which will include most young undergraduate students) as the norm for spoken language.

In 1.2.1 we discussed some of the differences in the manner of production of speech and writing, differences which often contribute significantly to characteristic forms in written language as against characteristic forms in speech. The overall effect is to produce speech which is less richly organised than written language, containing less densely packed information, but containing more interactive markers and planning 'fillers'. The standard descriptive grammars of English (e.g. Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech & Svartvik, 1972) typically describe features of the written language, or that form of the spoken language which is highly influenced by written language. From the descriptive work of a number of scholars studying spoken language (e.g. Labov, 1972a; Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975; Chafe, 1979; Ochs, 1979; Cicourel, 1981; Goffman, 1981) we can extract some (by no means all) features which characterise spoken language:

- (a) the syntax of spoken language is typically much less structured than that of written language
  - i. spoken language contains many incomplete sentences, often simply sequences of phrases
  - ii. spoken language typically contains rather little subordination
  - iii. in conversational speech, where sentential syntax can be observed, active declarative forms are normally found. In over 50 hours of recorded conversational speech, Brown, Currie and Kenworthy (1980) found very few examples of passives, it-clefts or wh-clefts. Crystal (1980) also presents some of the problems encountered in attempting to analyse spontaneous speech in terms of categories like *sentence* and *clause*.



As a brief example, notice how this speaker pauses and begins each new 'sentence' before formally completing the previous one:

*it's quite nice the Grassmarket since + it's always had the antique shops but they're looking + they're sort of + em + become a bit nicer +*

- (b) in written language an extensive set of metalingual markers exists to mark relationships between clauses (*that* complementisers, *when / while* temporal markers, so-called 'logical connectors' like *besides*, *moreover*, *however*, *in spite of*, etc.), in spoken language the largely paratactically organised chunks are related by *and*, *but*, *then* and, more rarely, *if*. The speaker is typically less explicit than the writer: *I'm so tired (because) I had to walk all the way home*. In written language rhetorical organisers of larger stretches of discourse appear, like *firstly*, *more important than* and *in conclusion*. These are rare in spoken language.

- (c) In written language, rather heavily premodified noun phrases (like that one) are quite common – it is rare in spoken language to find more than two premodifying adjectives and there is a strong tendency to structure the short chunks of speech so that only one predicate is attached to a given referent at a time (simple case-frame or one-place predicate) as in: *it's a biggish cat + tabby + with torn ears*, or in: *old man McArthur + he was a wee chap + oh very small + and eh a beard + and he was pretty stooped*.

The packaging of information related to a particular referent can, in the written language, be very concentrated, as in the following news item:

*A man who turned into a human torch ten days ago after snoozing in his locked car while smoking his pipe has died in hospital.*

(*Evening News* (Edinburgh), 22 April 1982)

- (d) Whereas written language sentences are generally structured in subject–predicate form, in spoken language it is

quite common to find what Givón (1979b) calls topic–comment structure, as in *the cats + did you let them out*.

- (e) in informal speech, the occurrence of passive constructions is relatively infrequent. That use of the passive in written language which allows non-attribution of agency is typically absent from conversational speech. Instead, active constructions with indeterminate group agents are noticeable, as in:  
*Oh everything they do in Edinburgh + they do it far too slowly*
- (f) in chat about the immediate environment, the speaker may rely on (e.g.) gaze direction to supply a referent: (looking at the rain) *frightful isn't it*.
- (g) the speaker may replace or refine expressions as he goes along: *this man + this chap she was going out with*
- (h) the speaker typically uses a good deal of rather generalised vocabulary: *a lot of, got, do, thing, nice, stuff, place and things like that*.
- (i) the speaker frequently repeats the same syntactic form several times over, as this fairground inspector does: *I look at fire extinguishers + I look at fire exits + I look at what gangways are available + I look at electric cables what + are they properly earthed + are they properly covered*
- (j) the speaker may produce a large number of prefabricated 'fillers': *well, erm, I think, you know, if you see what I mean, of course, and so on*.

Some of the typical distinctions between discourse which has been written and that which has been spoken can be seen in the following two descriptions of a rainbow. (No direct comparison is intended, since the two pieces of discourse were produced in strictly non-comparable circumstances for very different purposes.)

- (1) And then, in the blowing clouds, she saw a band of faint iridescence colouring in faint shadows a portion of the hill. And forgetting, startled, she looked for the hovering colour and saw a rainbow forming itself. In one place it gleamed fiercely, and, her heart anguished with hope, she sought the shadow of iris where the bow should be. Steadily the colour gathered, mysteriously, from nowhere, it took presence upon itself, there was a faint, vast rainbow.

(D. H. Lawrence, *The Rainbow*, chapter 16)

In the first extract (1), the rich lexis and well-organised structure are indications that the writer has taken time in the construction, and possibly reconstruction after several rewritings, of the final product. There are complete sentences, containing subordinations, frequent modifications via adjectives and adverbs, and more than single predicates per referential expression. In extract (2), there are frequent pauses, often interrupting major syntactic units, repetitions, incomplete sentences, generalised vocabulary, fillers and one example of a tongue-slip.

- (2) normally after + very heavy rain + or something like that + and + you're driving along the road + and + far away + you see + well + er + a series + of + stripes + + formed like a bow + an arch + + very very far away + ah + seven colours but ++ I guess you hardly ever see seven it's just a + a series of + colours which + they seem to be separate but if you try to look for the separate (kAz) - colours they always seem + very hard + to separate + if you see what I mean ++

(Postgraduate student speaking informally)

The speaker planning in the here-and-now, possibly threatened with his interlocutor wanting to take a turn, typically repeats himself a good deal, using the same syntactic structure, the same lexical items, using the first word that comes to mind rather than hunting for the *mot juste*, filling in pauses with 'fillers'. The overall effect is of information produced in a much less dense manner than is characteristic of written language. We must assume that the density of information packing in spoken language is appropriate for the listener to process comfortably. Most people have experienced expository prose read aloud which they have found difficult to follow in the spoken mode. Few people can extract a great deal from a lecture which is read aloud with no visual support. Goody

points out that the written form of language releases us from the linear experiential mode: 'the fact that it takes a visual form means that one can escape from the problem of the succession of events in time, by backtracking, skipping, looking to see who-did-it before we know what it is they did. Who, except the most obsessive academic, reads a book as he hears speech? Who, except the most avant-garde of modern dramatists, attempts to write as they speak?' (1977: 124).

### 1.3 Sentence and utterance

It might seem reasonable to propose that the features of spoken language outlined in the preceding section should be considered as features of utterances, and those features typical of written language as characteristic of sentences. In this convenient distinction, we can say, in a fairly non-technical way, that utterances are spoken and sentences are written and that we will apply these terms to what Lyons describes as 'the products of ordinary language-behaviour'. In the case of the term **sentence**, it is important to be clear about the type of object one is referring to. Lyons makes a distinction between 'text-sentences' and 'system-sentences'. He describes the latter in the following way:

system-sentences never occur as the products of ordinary language-behaviour. Representations of system-sentences may of course be used in metalinguistic discussion of the structure and functions of language: and it is such representations that are customarily cited in grammatical descriptions of particular languages.

(Lyons, 1977: 31)

Since the linguistic exemplification presented in support of our discussion throughout this book is overwhelmingly drawn from 'ordinary language behaviour', we shall generally employ the term 'sentence' in the 'text-sentence', and not the 'system-sentence' sense.

Although the linguist who undertakes the analysis of discourse has ultimately the same aims as a linguist who uses 'system-sentences' in his grammatical description of a language, there are important methodological differences involved in the two approaches. Both linguists wish to produce accurate descriptions of the particular language studied. In pursuit of this goal, the

grammarian will concentrate on a particular body of data and attempt to produce an exhaustive but economical set of rules which will account for all and only the acceptable sentences in his data. He will not normally seek to account for the mental processes involved in any language-user's production of those sentences, nor to describe the physical or social contexts in which those sentences occur. On each of these issues, concerning 'data', 'rules', 'processes' and 'contexts', the discourse analyst will take a different view.

### 1.3.1 *On 'data'*

The grammarian's 'data' is inevitably the single sentence, or a set of single sentences illustrating a particular feature of the language being studied. It is also typically the case that the grammarian will have constructed the sentence or sentences he uses as examples. This procedure is not often made explicit, but an overt commitment to the constructed-data approach has recently been expressed in the following terms:

I shall assume . . . that invented strings and certain intuitive judgements about them constitute legitimate data for linguistic research.

(Gazdar, 1979: 11)

In contrast, the analysis of discourse, as undertaken and exemplified in this book, is typically based on the linguistic output of someone other than the analyst. On the few occasions where constructed data is used as illustration (of a paradigm, for example, in Chapter 4), it is inevitably directed towards accounting for the range of formal options available to a speaker or writer. More typically, the discourse analyst's 'data' is taken from written texts or tape-recordings. It is rarely in the form of a single sentence. This type of linguistic material is sometimes described as 'performance-data' and may contain features such as hesitations, slips, and non-standard forms which a linguist like Chomsky (1965) believed should not have to be accounted for in the grammar of a language.

Although these two views of 'data' differ substantially, they are not incompatible, unless they are taken in an extreme form. A discourse analyst may regularly work with extended extracts of conversational speech, for example, but he does not consider his data in isolation from the descriptions and insights provided by sentence-grammarians. It should be the case that a linguist who is

primarily interested in the analysis of discourse is, in some sense, also a sentence-grammarian. Similarly, the sentence-grammarian cannot remain immured from the discourse he encounters in his daily life. The sentence he constructs to illustrate a particular linguistic feature must, in some sense, derive from the 'ordinary language' of his daily life and also be acceptable in it.

A dangerously extreme view of 'relevant data' for a discourse analyst would involve denying the admissibility of a constructed sentence as linguistic data. Another would be an analytic approach to data which did not require that there should be linguistic evidence in the data to support analytic claims. We shall return to the issue of 'relevant data' for discourse analysis in Chapter 2. An over-extreme view of what counts as data for the sentence-grammarian was, according to Sampson (1980), noticeable in some of the early work of generative grammarians. Chomsky gave an indication of the narrowness of view which could be taken, when, immediately before his conclusion that 'grammar is autonomous', he stated:

Despite the undeniable interest and importance of semantic and statistical studies of language, they appear to have no direct relevance to the problem of determining or characterising the set of grammatical utterances.

(Chomsky, 1957: 17)

The essential problem in an extreme version of the constructed-sentence approach occurs when the resulting sentences are tested only against the linguist's introspection. This can (and occasionally did) lead to a situation in which a linguist claims that the 'data' he is using illustrates acceptable linguistic strings because he says it does, as a result of personal introspection, and regardless of how many voices arise in disagreement. The source of this problem, as Sampson (1980: 153) points out, is that the narrow restriction of 'data' to constructed sentences and personal introspection leads to a 'non-testability', in principle, of any claims made. One outcome of this narrow view of data is that there is a concentration on 'artificially contrived sentences isolated from their communicative context' (see Preface to Givón (ed.), 1979). Although we shall appeal frequently, in the course of this book, to the insights of sentence-grammarians, including those working within a generative framework, we shall avoid as far as possible the methodology which depends on what Lyons (1968) described as regularised, standardised and decontextualised data.

1.3.2 *Rules versus regularities*

A corollary to the restricted data approach found in much of Chomskyan linguistics is the importance placed on writing **rules** of grammar which are fixed and true 100% of the time. Just as the grammarian's 'data' cannot contain any variable phenomena, so the grammar must have categorial rules, and not 'rules' which are true only some of the time. It is typical of arguments concerning the 'correct rules' of the language in the Chomskyan approach, and that of most other sentence-grammarians, that they are based on the presentation of 'example' and 'counterexample'. After all, a single (accepted) sentence, which is presented as a counterexample, can be enough to invalidate a rule of the categorial type. In this sense, the 'rules' of grammar appear to be treated in the same way as 'laws' in the physical sciences. This restricts the applicability of such rules since it renders them unavailable to any linguist interested in diachronic change or synchronic variation in a language. It should be emphasised that this is an extreme version of the sentence-grammarian's view and one which is found less frequently, in contemporary linguistics, than it was fifteen years ago.

The discourse analyst, with his 'ordinary language' data, is committed to quite a different view of the rule-governed aspects of a language. Indeed, he may wish to discuss, not 'rules' but **regularities**, simply because his data constantly exemplifies non-categorial phenomena. The regularities which the analyst describes are based on the frequency with which a particular linguistic feature occurs under certain conditions in his discourse data. If the frequency of occurrence is very high, then the phenomenon described may appear to be categorial. As Givón says:

what is the communicative difference between a rule of 90% fidelity and one of 100% fidelity? In psychological terms, next to nothing. In communication, a system with 90% categorial fidelity is a highly efficient system.

(Givón, 1979a: 28)

Yet the frequency of occurrence need not be as high as 90% to qualify as a regularity. The discourse analyst, like the experimental psychologist, is mainly interested in the level of frequency which reaches significance in perceptual terms. Thus, a regularity in discourse is a linguistic feature which occurs in a definable environment with a significant frequency. In trying to determine such

regularities, the discourse analyst will typically adopt the traditional methodology of descriptive linguistics. He will attempt to describe the linguistic forms which occur in his data, relative to the environments in which they occur. In this sense, discourse analysis is, like descriptive linguistics, a way of studying language. It may be regarded as a set of techniques, rather than a theoretically predetermined system for the writing of linguistic 'rules'. The discourse analyst attempts to *discover* regularities in his data and to *describe* them.

1.3.3 *Product versus process*

The regularities which the discourse analyst describes will normally be expressed in dynamic, not static, terms. Since the data investigated is the result of 'ordinary language behaviour', it is likely to contain evidence of the 'behaviour' element. That is, unless we believe that language-users present each other with prefabricated chunks of linguistic strings (sentences), after the fashion of Swift's professors at the grand academy of Lagado (*Gulliver's Travels*, part 3, chapter 5), then we must assume that the data we investigate is the result of active processes.

The sentence-grammarian does not in general take account of this, since his data is not connected to behaviour. His data consists of a set of objects called 'the well-formed sentences of a language', which can exist independently of any individual speaker of that language.

We shall characterise such a view as the **sentence-as-object** view, and note that such sentence-objects have no producers and no receivers. Moreover, they need not be considered in terms of function, as evidenced in this statement by Chomsky (1968: 62):

If we hope to understand human language and the psychological capacities on which it rests, we must first ask what it is, not how or for what purposes it is used.

A less extreme, but certainly related, view of natural language sentences can also be found elsewhere in the literature which relates to discourse analysis. In this view, there are producers and receivers of sentences, or extended texts, but the analysis concentrates solely on the product, that is, the words-on-the-page. Much of the analytic work undertaken in 'Textlinguistics' is of this type.

Typical of such an approach is the 'cohesion' view of the relationships between sentences in a printed text (e.g. the approach in Halliday & Hasan, 1976). In this view, cohesive ties exist between elements in connected sentences of a text in such a way that one word or phrase is linked to other words or phrases. Thus, an anaphoric element such as a pronoun is treated as a word which substitutes for, or refers back to, another word or words. Although there are claims that cohesive links in texts are used by text-producers to facilitate reading or comprehension by text-receivers (cf. Rochester & Martin 1977, 1979; Källgren, 1979), the analysis of the 'product', i.e. the printed text itself, does not involve any consideration of how the product is produced or how it is received. We shall describe such an approach as deriving from a **text-as-product** view. This view does not take account of those principles which constrain the production and those which constrain the interpretation of texts.

In contrast to these two broadly defined approaches, the view taken in this book is best characterised as a **discourse-as-process** view. The distinction between treating discourse as 'product' or 'process' has already been made by Widdowson (1979b: 71). We shall consider words, phrases and sentences which appear in the textual record of a discourse to be evidence of an attempt by a producer (speaker / writer) to communicate his message to a recipient (hearer / reader). We shall be particularly interested in discussing how a recipient might come to comprehend the producer's intended message on a particular occasion, and how the requirements of the particular recipient(s), in definable circumstances, influence the organisation of the producer's discourse. This is clearly an approach which takes the communicative function of language as its primary area of investigation and consequently seeks to describe linguistic form, not as a static object, but as a dynamic means of expressing intended meaning.

There are several arguments against the static concept of language to be found in both the 'sentence-as-object' and 'text-as-product' approaches. For example, Wittgenstein (1953: 132) warns that 'the confusions that occupy us arise when language is like an engine idling, not when it is doing work'. In the course of describing how a sentence-as-object approach, based exclusively on syntactic descriptions, fails to account for a variety of sentential

structures, Kuno (1976) concludes that 'it is time to re-examine every major syntactic constraint from a functional point of view'. Similar conclusions are expressed by Creider (1979), Givón (1976, 1979b), Rommetveit (1974) and Tyler (1978). In criticising the text-as-product view of cohesion in text, Morgan (1979) argues that we see a link between a particular pronoun and a full noun phrase in a text because we assume the text is coherent and not because the pronoun 'refers back' to the noun phrase. We seek to identify the writer's intended referent for a pronoun, since a pronoun can, in effect, be used to refer to almost anything. That is, what the textual record means is determined by our interpretation of what the producer intended it to mean.

The discourse analyst, then, is interested in the function or purpose of a piece of linguistic data and also in how that data is processed, both by the producer and by the receiver. It is a natural consequence that the discourse analyst will be interested in the results of psycholinguistic processing experiments in a way which is not typical of the sentence-grammarians. It also follows that the work of those sociolinguists and ethnographers who attempt to discuss language in terms of user's purposes will also be of interest. In the course of this book, we shall appeal to evidence in the psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic literature which offers insights into the way in which discourse, produced in describable contexts for recognisable purposes, is processed and comprehended.

#### 1.3.4 On 'context'

We have constantly referred to the 'environment', 'circumstances' or **context** in which language is used. In Chapter 2 we shall explore the problem of specifying the relevant context. Here we simply remark that in recent years the idea that a linguistic string (a sentence) can be fully analysed without taking 'context' into account has been seriously questioned. If the sentence-grammarians wish to make claims about the 'acceptability' of a sentence in determining whether the strings produced by his grammar are correct sentences of the language, he is implicitly appealing to contextual considerations. After all, what do we do when we are asked whether a particular string is 'acceptable'? Do we not immediately, and quite naturally, set about constructing

some circumstances (i.e. a 'context') in which the sentence could be acceptably used?

Any analytic approach in linguistics which involves contextual considerations, necessarily belongs to that area of language study called **pragmatics**. 'Doing discourse analysis' certainly involves 'doing syntax and semantics', but it primarily consists of 'doing pragmatics'. When the principles which we have expounded in 1.3 are placed alongside Morris's definition of pragmatics as 'the relations of signs to interpreters' (1938: 6), the connection becomes quite clear. In discourse analysis, as in pragmatics, we are concerned with what people using language are doing, and accounting for the linguistic features in the discourse as the means employed in what they are doing.

In summary, the discourse analyst treats his data as the record (text) of a dynamic process in which language was used as an instrument of communication in a context by a speaker / writer to express meanings and achieve intentions (discourse). Working from this data, the analyst seeks to describe regularities in the linguistic realisations used by people to communicate those meanings and intentions.

## 2

# The role of context in interpretation

### 2.1 Pragmatics and discourse context

In Chapter 1, we emphasised that the discourse analyst necessarily takes a pragmatic approach to the study of language in use. Such an approach brings into consideration a number of issues which do not generally receive much attention in the formal linguist's description of sentential syntax and semantics. We noted, for example, that the discourse analyst has to take account of the context in which a piece of discourse occurs. Some of the most obvious linguistic elements which require contextual information for their interpretation are the deictic forms such as *here*, *now*, *I*, *you*, *this* and *that*. In order to interpret these elements in a piece of discourse, it is necessary to know (at least) who the speaker and hearer are, and the time and place of the production of the discourse. In this chapter we shall discuss these and other aspects of contextual description which are required in the analysis of discourse.

There are, however, other ways in which the discourse analyst's approach to linguistic data differs from that of the formal linguist and leads to a specialised use of certain terms. Because the analyst is investigating the use of language in context by a speaker / writer, he is more concerned with the relationship between the speaker and the utterance, on the particular occasion of use, than with the potential relationship of one sentence to another, regardless of their use. That is, in using terms such as **reference**, **presupposition**, **implicature** and **inference**, the discourse analyst is describing what speakers and hearers are doing, and not the relationship which exists between one sentence or proposition and another.