



Towards a Critique of the Text Analysis Theory

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Abstract

Language use is a product of its functions in varied communication situations. This is the case in literary, non-literary, written and spoken texts. Fowler (1981) opines that “linguistic structure is not arbitrary. It is determined and motivated by the functions it performs.” In language and linguistics, theoretical frameworks explain the dynamics of human communication. In this regard, the Text Analysis Theory is worthy of scholarly attention. This study investigates its strengths and weaknesses of the theory, as evident in the postulations and notions therein. On the whole, this study concludes that in spite of the weaknesses of the Text Analysis Theory (such as its exclusion of non-verbal accompaniments in the elucidation of human communication), the theory reasonably answers classical communication questions from speaker-hearer and writer-reader ends, due to its appreciable coverage and instructive submissions on linguistic and extra-linguistic underpinnings of human communication.

Keywords: Text Analysis Theory, critique, communication, discourse, formalism, pragmatics.

1. INTRODUCTION

Language is the instrument of communication among human beings, due to its in-built potentials. In this study, the Text Analysis Theory is subjected to a critique, thereby investigating its applicability in human communication. There are different theories in the literature of language and linguistics. The footing that the Text Analysis Theory has in cross-domain language studies (pragmatics, semantics, discourse analysis, applied linguistics, etc.), necessitates the use of cross-domain insights to appraise the theory. The link between one of these fields of language study and the other, is essentially the link between linguistic and extra-linguistic forces of communication. This study is therefore immersed in the view that language use is not incidental.

2. Literature Review

In this section of the paper, we review certain notions: “language”, “discourse” and “speech act”.

2.1 Language

The Latin expression *lingua* (italics) which means “tongue” is linked with the origin of the term “language”. The formal properties of language (sounds and linguistic stretches) abound in every human language. A conventional means of human communication, language is believed to have specific attributes: it is a system; it involves the use of symbols; it is arbitrary; it is a vocal phenomenon; it is dynamic; it is a vehicle of culture; it is a social phenomenon; it is living; and it is a symbol of individual and collective identity. It is therefore not surprising that language is subjected to scientific scholarly attention to explain not only its formal properties, but also its social relevance. For more understanding of the term language, see Dada (2000). Language can be studied in terms of its phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics and pragmatics.

2.2 Discourse

Brown and Yule (1983, p. 1) opine that discourse is “language in use”. Essentially, the interactions that human beings engage in are called discourse. It abounds as written or spoken text. Texts have organizational structure which can

be studied – this is referred to as “discourse analysis”. Terms commonly used in discourse analysis are: “participants”, “conversation”, “talk initiation”, “adjacency pairs”, “summon”, “speaker change”, “discourse interruption”, “topic negotiation” and “repair mechanism”.

2.3 Speech Act

A pioneer of speech act theory, Austin (1962) classifies speech acts as: locutionary act (the utterance of a sentence with determinate sense and reference); illocutionary act (the making of a statement, offer, promise, etc. in uttering a sentence by virtue of the conventional “force” associated with it or with its explicit performative paraphrase); and perlocutionary act (the bringing about of effects on the audience by means of uttering the sentence, such effects, being special to the circumstances of utterance). Propositions of sentences are conveyed through speech acts. Austin (ibid.) distinguishes between performatives and constatives. Constatives are statements which have been traditionally treated as having the property of truth or falsity. But performatives may not meet this criterion. They index the fact that an utterance uttered, is the performance of an action; they transcend, mere stating. Rather than being true or false, performatives are either “felicitous” or “infelicitous”. In Austin’s view, performatives and constatives differ in the areas of “doing” and “saying”. Although the classification of speech acts is intractable, classical theorists in the field of pragmatics evolve speech act taxonomies (classifications)².

3. The Text Analysis Theory

Marjory Meechan (2004) presents elaborate perspectives on the Text Analysis Theory:

Text analysis, both written and oral, concentrates on the linguistic structure of discourse, both within and between utterances. These kinds of studies include analysis of pragmatics and speech act theory ... A prominent sociolinguistic approach to text analysis uses variationist methodology. The variationist approach to discourse operates under the assumption that although a variety of structures may be used to fulfill any one discourse function, patterns in the variation found in natural conversational speech show that there is structure in discourse. An important tool in variationist analysis is the sociolinguistic variable, which roughly speaking, encompasses alternative ways of saying something. For example, in (6) the variable involves question, which can have a variety of forms. Following the standard conversation in variationist sociolinguistics, the question label is placed in parenthesis to indicate that it is a variable.

(6) (Question)

Wanna drive?

Do you want to drive?

You want to drive?

In the study of structure in discourse any set of utterances with equivalent discourse functions can constitute a variable. To determine which utterances are functionally equivalent, utterances in specific types of discourse units, such as narratives or lists, are analyzed to isolate their function. For example, narratives are composed of several different clause types. Abstract clauses, which contain a general summary of the experience to be narrated, will sometimes appear at the beginning of the narrative. More often, orientation clauses will begin the narrative to give the background to the story, including who was involved as well as where and when it took place. Complicating action clauses describe the events of the story and each event generally appears in the order it took place. Evaluation clauses consist of comments regarding the events. Finally, the narrative may end with a coda clause that serves to shift the time of the narrative back into present time. Example (7) shows a narrative analysis with most of these elements.

(7) Narrative example from southern Alberta English Corpus ...

- a. Abstract Well, there was one time
- b. Orientation When I was driving with my mom
- c. Orientation I just – just got my learner’s,
- d. Orientation We’re going to my – had a banquet-hokey bouquet
- e. Orientation and it was snowing outside, everything
- f. Complicating action and all of a sudden, I just lost control of the car going down into a coulee.
- g. Orientation Cap’s sowy going over
- h. Orientation and I’m just turning it this way,
- i. Complicating action slammed on the brakes.
- j. Orientation There’s my mom
- k. Orientation Just looking.
- l. Orientation just praying, eh
- m. Complicating action and I w – I just – I missed the barricade by this much
- n. Complicating action and then I came to a complete in an in – into ...
- o. Evaluation It was close
- p. Complicating action sa – I got out of the car.
- q. Complicating action I said, ‘mom, you’re driving now’.
- r. Evaluation I think that was the closest thing

s. Evaluation that I came to even experiencing anything

t. Evaluation that would be – even be close to death.

This approach to discourse can be very valuable for examining the role of discourse markers. These are elements that bracket utterances and organize the sequence and relationship between events and participants in the discourse ... Speakers are not generally aware of discourse markers but they are important signal in discourse. For example, in (7a), the speaker's use of well may be expressing the feeling that while the experience was harrowing, there was never any strong danger of death. Cohesive devices are also important for tracking participants and events in discourse, as an examination of temporal and spatial reference clearly shows ... Pragmatics and discourse analysis have revealed that speakers have conventions for reference in discourse. For example, the pronoun it is generally found after the full NP the car in discourse. This is called anaphoric reference. In less frequent cases, a pronoun may precede the full noun phrase, a case of cataphoric reference. For example, in 7g, the speaker might have used the clause in (8):

(8) It's slowly going over, the car.

The function and structure of discourse marking is still not very well understood ... one of the problems of studying discourse markers is the fact that they often perform multiple functions depending on the type of clause or adjacency pair where they are found and their position in the clause ...”

4. A Critique of the Text Analysis Theory

4.1 Strengths of the Text Analysis Theory

4.1.1 Grammar

The grammar-driven components of the Text Analysis Theory facilitate decoding of meaning. Decoders' interpretation of utterances aligns with Austin's (ibid.) notion of “uptake” (how a given speech act (or expression) is understood by the hearer). In written and spoken texts, the decoder of an utterance should process grammar and extra-linguistic components correctly to arrive at speaker-meaning. For example, the decoder should know whether or not the encoder is: informing or ordering; asserting or persuading; stating or condemning. John T. Kearns, cited in Savas L. T. (1994, p. 50) notes that “a linguistic act, or speech act, is an intentional, meaningful act performed with an expression or expressions. Even though the word ‘speech’ suggests saying something out loud, I use the two expressions ‘speech act’ and ‘linguistic act’ interchangeably for acts performed with expressions, whether they are out loud, in writing, or ‘in one’s head’. Both speakers/writers and their audiences (when they understand the speakers/writers) perform linguistic acts.”

Within the scope of grammar, the Text Analysis Theory captures the notion of “thematic roles” which impinges on the meanings conveyed in linguistic stretches¹. The functional perspectives of clauses and discourse markers, as contained in the Text Analysis Theory, explains the importance of cohesion and coherence in human communication. Brenders (1982) submit that “coherent conversation involves both the coordinated production of illocutionary acts and the management of the potential perlocutionary effects of utterances.” By applying appropriate clause structure and discourse markers in varied communication situations (See orientational clauses in the Text Analysis Theory), participants of discourse prevent face threatening acts (FTAs). For example, FTA or FSA can be performed via clarity or non-clarity in the use of vocabulary and grammar conventions of language.

4.1.2 Intertextuality

Intertextuality is essentially about how one text (or linguistic stretch) reads another. Due to its inbuilt intertextuality perspective, the Text Analysis Theory is equipped with the features to explain the link between linguistic and pragmatic contexts of language use. The intertextual features of the Text Analysis Theory make it suitable for the analysis of literary and non-literary texts. Being an intertextuality-laden theory, it encapsulates the structure, notions and conventions of discourse: turn-taking, cooperative principle, politeness principle, coherence and cohesion. The Text Analysis Theory is appropriate for the elucidation of the structure and dynamics of discourse as it is rooted in ethnomethodology. Marjory Meehan (ibid.) submits that “ethnomethodology, also called conversation analysis, is another approach to the study of discourse interactions. By identifying different types of utterances and isolating recurring patterns for their distribution in language corpora of tape-recorded natural conversations, many rules for the organization of conversation have been discovered. One very common structure that has been identified is the adjacency pair. This is an ordered pair of adjacent utterances spoken by two different speakers. Once the first utterance is spoken, a second utterance is then required ... Conversation analysis also tries to identify discourse units within a conversation ... Another common part of a conversation is a closing section that signals the end of the conversation. Between the opening and closing, speakers participate in the conversation in turns. The study of turn-taking is a central interest in conversation analysis. Three basic rules for turn-taking have been isolated based on the observation that at the end of a turn, a speaker may either select the next speaker (for example, by asking him or a question) or may not ... Conversation analyses have shown that there are cues in the discourse that tell speakers where potential transition points occur in conversation.

Besides direct questions, transition points can also be identified by intonational cues and even pause durations ... Interestingly, cross-linguistic studies have shown that there are culture conventions for turn-taking ...”

4.1.3 Implicature

The Text Analysis Theory elucidates overt and covert dimensions of language use. Therefore, it is practically relevant in implicature theorizing. In natural human communication, the mental states of the participants, their cognition, beliefs, speech acts, emotions and shared knowledge have implications on communication events, because of the instrumentality of conventional and conversational implicatures on human communication. Grice (1975) contends that while conventional implicatures are generated from the conventional meanings of words, conversational implicatures are produced when the Cooperative Principle of conversation is violated. Indeed, textual analyses across genres reveal that Implicatures are immersed in cognition and the values- systems of society that participants of discourse invoke as they work out the “topic relevance” of utterances. See Sperber and Wilson (1986) for tips on “topic relevance”. Chilton (2005a, pp. 19-52) rightly notes that “cognitive pragmatics is defined as a study of mental states of the interlocutors, their beliefs, desires, goals, and intentions ... produced and interpreted by human individuals interacting with one another ... If language use (discourse) is, as the tenets of CDA assert, connected to the construction of knowledge about social objects, identities, processes, etc., then that construction can only be taking place in the minds of (interacting) individuals.”

4.1.4 Linking Linguistics and Extra-linguistics

While the notion of “sociolinguistic variable” in the Text Analysis Theory reveals its pragmatic feature, the notion of “clause variation” reveals that the theory has inclination in formalism. Clement Eloghosa Ochia & Adekunle Mamudu (2018) reports that “formalist criticism, as observed by its leading proponents, Boris Eichenbaum, Victor Shklovsky and Roman Jakobson, consider the text as the primary focus of study. The concept examines such issues as the way the writing reflects and influences our appreciation of the patterns, organization and language of the text.” The idea that language use involves making references that are inferred by decoders, puts the Text Analysis Theory in a good stead to account for the nature of meaning and communication. Levinson (1983) is instructive as far as theoretical perspective of inference is concerned³. Interestingly, C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards’ definition of meaning (cf. C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards (1923), pp. 186-7, cited in Leech (1981), p. 1) is instructive, partly because it captures the notion of reference (referents).

C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards (ibid.) view meaning as:

... the connotation of a word; the place of anything in a system; the practical consequences of a thing in our future experience; that to which the user of a symbol actually refers; that to which the user of a symbol ought to be referring; that to which the user of a symbol believes himself to be referring; that to which the interpreter of a symbol: (a) refers; (b) believes himself to be referring; and (c) believes the user to be referring.”

4.1.5 Felicity Condition

The Text Analysis Theory reveals not only the appropriateness of language use in discrete circumstances, but also the results of violation of the conventions of appropriateness. Austin (ibid.) contends that in the performance of speech acts (use of language), felicity conditions (the right persons using the right language in the right situation) must be fulfilled. The discrete discourse situations that necessitate the use of specific clause types (e.g. orientation clauses), as in the Text Analysis Theory, reveal that the theory is crucial in the use of felicity conditions to perform speech acts. Human beings think (mental state and cognition) in accordance with social (societal) nuances which operate as ethics, values, beliefs and norms. The relationship between any element of communication and any value-system is essentially linked to the notion of “felicity condition”. Chilton (ibid.) opines that “cognitive pragmatics is defined as a study of mental states of the interlocutors, their beliefs, desires, goals, and intentions ... produced and interpreted by human individuals interacting with one another ... If language use (discourse) is, as the tenets of CDA assert, connected to the construction of knowledge about social objects, identities, processes, etc., then that construction can only be taking place in the minds of (interacting) individuals.”

4.2. Weaknesses of the Text Analysis Theory

4.2.1 Narrow in the Conceptualization of Formalism

The Text Analysis Theory does not elaborately explain how grammatical categories impinge on meaning. Although the theory mentions the notion of NP (Noun Phrase), there is more to NP in the interaction between grammar and extra-linguistic elements of communication. For example, Acheoah (2014) is an extended study on the Illocutionary Frames Principle (IFP) evolved in Acheoah (2011). These studies contend that clause structure impinge on illocutionary contents of utterances.

4.2.2. Non-verbal Communication

Given the fact that Text Analysis Theory excludes the discussion of non-verbal communication, the theory is not satisfactorily realistic in describing human communication. Searle (1969), cited in Jozsef Andor (2010), submits that “illocutionary acts are always, in my sense, speech acts, even if they are not performed in language but are performed by raising your arm or by winking, or by making some other gesture ...” An encompassing language theory should not be bereaved of the dynamics of non-verbal communication. Acheoah (2015) presents the notion “semiotic particulars” as a component of non-verbal communication (extra-linguistic act).

5. Conclusion

This study subjects the Text Analysis Theory to a critique, and observes clearly, its strengths and weaknesses. Within the purview of language studies, the theory is versatile; it is rooted in pragmatics, semantics, discourse analysis, sociolinguistics, and beyond. Being that the theory is concerned with linguistic and extra-linguistic underpinnings of language use, it has cross-field research relevance. A critique of any language theory investigates its potency and pitfall in the elucidation of the dynamics of human communication. Conclusively, this study reveals that effective communication presupposes deploying theoretical notions in a language-based theoretical framework such as the Text Analysis Theory.

Notes

¹ NPs (Noun Phrases) mentioned in the Text Analysis Theory, is instructive in this regard. William O’ Grady (2004) submits that “another aspect of semantic interpretation involves determining the roles that the referents of NPs play in the situations described by sentences ... In most linguistic analyses, at least the following thematic roles are recognized:

Table 6.14 Thematic roles	
Agent	the entity that performs an action
Theme	the entity undergoing an action or a movement
Source	the starting point for a movement
Goal	the end point for a movement
Location	the place where an action occurs

² See Austin (ibid.), Searle (1969) as well as Bach and Harnish (1979) for insights on speech act categories.

³ Levinson (ibid.) submits that “an inference theory is needed to account for which interpretation will be taken from which context since idiom theory suggests that there will be a considerable comprehension problem in its application. There are, therefore, a number of distinct inference theories, but then, share the following essential properties: The literal meaning and the literal force of an utterance is computed by, and available to, participants; For an utterance-trigger, i.e. some indication that the literal meaning and/or literal force is conversationally inadequate in the context and must be “repaired” by some inference; There must be specific principles or rules of inference that will drive, from the literal meaning and force and the context, the relevant indirect force; There must be pragmatically sensitive linguistic rules or constraints, which will govern the occurrence of, for example, pre-verbal “please” in both direct and indirect request.

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