

# *Unit four*

## Text and context

### Written discourse

#### *Aim of this unit*

The aim of this unit is to explore some of the language devices which enable whole written texts to work.

In linguistics, the phrase **discourse analysis** is used to refer to the analysis of both spoken and written texts. In each case, the aim is to analyse the way texts work across the boundaries of single sentences or utterances to form whole stretches of language.

This sounds very simple, but actually the word ‘discourse’ has had quite a long and complicated history. The situation now is that it means slightly different things inside and outside the academic world; it can also mean different things in different academic subject areas. For these reasons, it’s worth spending a bit of time thinking about its variant meanings.

The basic meaning of ‘discourse’, in modern ordinary usage, is ‘talk’. Originally, the term ‘discourse’ came from Latin, *discursus*, meaning ‘to run’, ‘to run on’, ‘to run to and fro’. Historically, it has been applied more to rehearsed forms of spoken language—like speeches, where people ‘run on’ about a topic—than to spontaneous speech. The modern meaning of ‘discourse’ as encompassing all forms of talk has evolved because conversations, like formal speeches, ‘run’. This means that speakers make an effort to give their interactions shape and coherence—not consciously, but as an integral part of co-operating with another speaker to make meaning. So when people refer to *talk as discourse* they are drawing attention to *the way talk is a crafted medium*. While it has long been understood that this was true of speeches and other aspects of formal oratory, it has only recently been recognised that casual conversation is subtly and skilfully fashioned by speakers as they go along, often at rapid speed. The way different types of talk work will be explored in Unit 5.

Another way of looking at talk-as-discourse is to use the metaphor of weaving. In fact, we use this metaphor very often in our own talk about talk: for example, we talk about ‘losing the thread of the conversation’, ‘cottoning on’ to what people mean when they ‘spin us a yarn’; teachers often close their lessons by referring to ‘tying up loose ends’. We clearly see speakers as engaged together in discourse in the way a group of weavers would be to create a pattern in some fabric.

But it’s not only spoken language that ‘runs’ or gets woven into patterns. This is also

true of written language; and the modern use of the word ‘discourse’ can also be used to refer to aspects of written texts. This tends to be used much more within the academic world than outside it.

The word **text** itself originally meant ‘something woven’ (Latin *texere*, *textum*—‘to weave’), and you can see a relationship between text, textile (‘capable of being woven’) and texture (‘having the quality of woven cloth’). Written language is also often referred to as ‘material’.

Like speakers, then, writers manipulate different aspects of language in order to weave their texts and give their material ‘texture’. So to talk about discourse in written texts is to focus on the way written texts are constructed. This is what this unit is all about.

### *Contents*

#### **MAKE AND MEND**

This section involves practical activities of reassembling and writing material in order to show you what you already know about the way texts work.

#### **TRACING THE PATTERNS**

In this section, you will be exploring how you knew what to do in the first section. You will be looking at how texts work in a number of different ways:  
Lexical cohesion

This looks at the way aspects of vocabulary link parts of texts together.  
Grammatical cohesion

Here you will be exploring some of the important ways that grammar holds texts together across sentence boundaries.  
Information structure

This focuses on the role of grammatical features in the ordering and presentation of information within texts.

#### **THE TEXTILE INDUSTRY**

In this section, the focus is on the way texts operate within contexts. This involves thinking about aspects of culture and representation.

### *Texts used include*

- 🌀 Advertisements
- 🌀 Information leaflets
- 🌀 Extracts from novels and short stories
- 🌀 Poems
- 🌀 Some children’s writing
- 🌀 A range of notes and memos

If the metaphor of text as weaving is true, then it must be possible to see how the various threads are woven together within written material.

The activities that follow aim to show how some important aspects of language act as the threads that give texts a particular texture.

## Make and mend

### *Activity*

#### **Stitching it back together**

Our constant and powerful need to understand what's around us leads us to try to make sense of anything that's presented to us as a text. To illustrate this idea, read through Text: Statements.

#### **Text: Statements**

Allow the fruit to steam in its own juice for a further 15 minutes.

So she hated it when that infuriating Keith Scott seemed to go out of his way to suggest that her heart wasn't in the affair.

That's why we created 'Portfolio', a brand new concept in saving.

Put them into a fireproof dish with the water, and a tablespoon of the sugar.

She knew that he loved her—in a calm settled way rather than any grand passion—and that he would make her a good, kind husband.

Ensuring that the lid is tightly sealed, put the dish into a preheated oven, Gas Regulo 6.

So that way, you can have your cake and eat it too.

Pour over the top, and serve with double cream.

Melodie Neil and Jed Martin were old friends.

Mix juice with the brandy, mulled wine, and rest of the sugar. We do, too.

Wash and core the apples, taking care to remove all pips.

In short, when she became engaged to him she knew exactly what she was doing.

Spoon out the cooked apples and arrange them attractively in rounds on a serving plate.

Do you feel that you never get a fair slice of the capital cake? Slice finely.

Portfolio is a high interest investment account that makes your money work for you, while still giving you instant access to your capital.

Reduce temperature to 3 after 10 minutes.

Could you read any of it in any way that worked and made sense?

If you could, that proves that you were already looking for patterns within the text.

In fact, the text you have just read contains statements in random order from three completely different sources. With your knowledge of this, use any strategies you have in order to put the original texts back together.

Divide up the statements; then, within each text, arrange the statements in order, so that they read naturally.

When you have finished your sorting, check your answers by turning to p. 241.

Look particularly at where you didn't get the order right. Can you see what led you astray? (Note: there is no commentary on this activity.)

### *Activity*

#### **Discourse consequences**

This activity can only be done in groups.

Text: Starter lines consists of the first lines for six different types of writing—different genres.

Each group should take a different line, and add a second line to it in the same genre. They should then fold the paper over so that only the second line is visible, and pass it on to the next group. When all the groups have contributed a line, open up the folded page and read it aloud to the whole group.

As a whole group, assess how far the six different texts follow rules for the various genres (even if the writers have chosen to parody the text, they will be still be using the rules). (Note: there is no commentary on this activity.)

#### **Text: Starter lines**

- 1 Once upon a time was a beautiful princess who lived a castle high up on a mountainside.
- 2 Cricket is a game which involves as much psychological nerve as physical strength and dexterity.
- 3 This week you will need to have your wits about you, as Saturn's influence could lead you to be off guard at a crucial moment.
- 4 Male, 42, home-owner, recently relocated to Bristol.
- 5 'Spacegrazer to Hyperpod, come in.' Zhata feared the worst. The asteroid strom had passed just too close for comfort.
- 6 To make watercress soup, first sauté a finely chopped onion by melting a knob of butter in a saucepan over a medium heat.

### *Activity*

#### **Twenty-minute texts**

Working in groups, each group should write a short text in one of the genres listed below. Each piece of writing must contain the following words:

figure    leaves    dusk

Don't spend any more than twenty minutes on your piece of writing.

#### *Genres*

- 🌀 Epitaph
- 🌀 Maths textbook
- 🌀 Tabloid newspaper article
- 🌀 Romantic fiction
- 🌀 Advert
- 🌀 Menu
- 🌀 Set of instructions
- 🌀 Estate agent's blurb

When you have finished all your texts, pin them up and read them out.

How has each piece of writing followed the rules for its particular genre?

(Note: there is no commentary on this activity.)

The sections that follow aim to show you some of the linguistic strategies you have just been using in working with texts.

## **Tracing the patterns**

If a speaker or hearer of English hears or reads a passage of the language which is more than one sentence in length, he or she can normally decide without difficulty whether it forms a unified whole or is just a collection of unrelated sentences. **Cohesion** (or its absence) is what makes the difference between the two.

Cohesion is what gives a text texture.

(Halliday and Hasan, 1976)

### **LEXICAL COHESION**

One of the strategies you used was your understanding of words and phrases in the

English language—the vocabulary system. In particular, you used your awareness of *relationships between words*: this is called **lexical cohesion**. There are many different kinds of relationship that could be involved.

### Activity

In Text: Links, some of the links that are commonly used between words are outlined, with an example, where possible, from the sorting exercise you did previously (Text: Statements). As you read through these notes, see if you can add to the lists by finding examples from the texts you yourselves have written. (Note: there is no commentary on this activity.)

### Text: Links

*Direct repetition* (exactly the same word repeated):

Text C: juice...juice

*Synonyms, or near-synonyms* (use of words with similar meanings):

Text B: saving... investment

*Superordination* (where one word encompasses another in meaning):

Text C: fruit...apples

*Antonyms* (opposites):

Text A: loved...hated

Text C: put [them] into...

*specific-general reference* (words referring to the same thing or person, but where one has more details than the other):

Text C: a fireproof dish...the dish

Text C (going from general to specific):...cooked apples

*Ordered series* (word that we know as a series—for example,) the days of the week, months of the year, or the seasons):

Text C: Regulo 6...3; 10 minutes...15 minutes

*Whole-part* (where one term names a part of an item that the other) word describes in full):

Text C: apples...pips

A much more general aspect of lexical cohesion is the use by writers of particular semantic fields (see Unit 2, p. 89): this means referring to a specific area of experience or knowledge. The clearest examples of semantic fields occur in the specialist language of occupations.

### Activity

Read through Text: Occupations, which contains the language of ten different

occupations. Try to work out what the occupations are, and which particular words and phrases helped you to pinpoint them. Answers on p. 242. There is no commentary on this activity.

### **Text: Occupations**

The vehile was seen proceeding down the main street in a westerly direction leading to a spacious and well-appointed residence with considerable potential. She to work, mixing up the six-ten with two part of 425, and dabbing the mixture through 6 ezimeshes. 'This one has a fine shaggy nose and a fruity bouquet with a flowery head', she said. He managed to get into a good position, just kissing the crushion. He managed to get into a good position, just kissing the cushion. He said 'just pop up onto the couch and we'll see what we can do'. She pulled down the menu, close the command by using the curser, then quit. Instead, he mulched well, turned over and left the beds to settle. Good progress made, but concentration sometimes rather poor; more effort required if success is to be expected in the important months ahead.

However, semantic fields do not have to contain technical language, or occupational terms. It may be simply that a text uses several words that all refer to the same subject matter, activity or experience: for example, the romantic fiction text in the sorting exercise at the beginning of this unit (p. 168) contained many words associated with love.

### ***Activity***

Go through each of the extracts you reassembled in the first activity, and write a list of words and phrases within each text that are in the same semantic field. Make up your own headings for the columns. If you find that you have more than one semantic field in a text, outline each field by listing them in separate columns. For example, for the romantic fiction you might decide on the headings 'words for feelings' and 'words for relationships', in order to make finer distinctions than would be possible with one heading of 'love'.

Text A: romantic fiction	words for feelings	words for relationships

When you have shared and discussed your headings, turn to the texts you wrote yourselves. Can you find any examples of semantic fields that you have employed, in order to construct a particular genre?

(Note: There is no commentary on this activity.)

### Activity

Sometimes, writers deliberately weave together different semantic fields in order to foreground a particular idea. **Foregrounding** is a type of highlighting—it means that the writer is drawing attention to something and making the reader view it in a certain way. Look again at Text B (p. 241). Why does the writer of this text use two very different semantic fields—what idea is being foregrounded? How does the writer’s use of the two different semantic fields help to shape the text?


Now read through Text: ‘The Good, the Bad and the Ugly’, which uses vocabulary from two very different types of activity. After you have read it carefully, list the two semantic fields that are used, giving as many examples of the use of each as you can find. Put a ring round any terms that could be included in either field.

Why do you think the writer has chosen to weave together these two different types of vocabulary? Why does the advert not simply use farming terms?

(Note: there is no commentary on this activity. *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* is the title of a famous Western film starring Clint Eastwood.)



## Text: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly



## THE GOOD

Sting CT® Herbicide applied in stubbles or on land cultivated after harvest, eliminates the problem of volunteers and annual weeds in the following crop. But good stubble management is only part of the story. Sting CT biodegrades rapidly in the soil. In terms of operator safety, it isn't classified under COSHH. Also, it's much less expensive than paraquat\*. So Sting CT doesn't cost the earth.

## THE BAD

Sting CT is active on volunteer cereals, volunteer oilseed rape, annual grasses and broad-leaved weeds at all stages of growth. It penetrates right down to the roots to prevent regrowth. What's more it's rainfast, from 1 hour after application, and thanks to this fast absorption it allows you to start drilling within 6 hours of stubble clearing.

## AND THE UGLY PLUS A WHOLE CAST OF VOLUNTEERS


By removing the "green bridge" you prevent the carry-over of diseases and remove a haven for ugly pests, for instance BEV carrying aphids, which could otherwise carry virus infections into your next crop.

*The Good The Bad and The Ugly is an everyday story of stubble management. With Sting CT, the plot has a happy ending.*

\* Average rates

For more information on Sting CT and Stubble Management send to:  
Monsanto, Pwsgnat, PO Box 41,  
London NW1 2TE.  
No stamp required.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
Address: \_\_\_\_\_  
Tel: \_\_\_\_\_



**StingCT** Stubble  
Fast, Thorough and Downy to Cost the Earth

Read the label before you buy. For protection when Sting CT contains glyphosate. Sting is a registered trade mark of Monsanto Company. © Monsanto Plc. 2004 UK.

## Activity

Another option that a writer has, in using vocabulary from different semantic fields, is to entwine the words and phrases so closely that the two systems are difficult to disentangle. One way of bringing different systems of vocabulary together is to use metaphor: this is

where one thing is described as if it were another (see Unit 2). Because metaphor tells us that one thing *is* another, it is a powerful factor in positioning the reader and constructing a particular viewpoint.

Look back to pp. 166 ff. On these pages, the metaphorical terms describe language as if it were cloth. To get some more understanding of how metaphor works, do the following:

- ☉ Imagine language as vegetation. What kinds of words and phrases might now be appropriate in describing language? Example: *he tended his language carefully, and it blossomed.*
- ☉ Imagine language as a building. What terms could be used now? Example: *my sentences need some scaffolding.*
- ☉ Imagine language as a person. What terms, normally applied to people, might you use? Example: *my essay wandered off the point, and failed.*

Now read Text: Yakult, p. 155.

What metaphors are used in this text to describe the human body?

(Note: there is no commentary on this activity.)

### **Activity**

Another wide-ranging strategy which you used in writing and handling texts in the first part of this unit was an understanding of levels of formality in vocabulary (see also Unit 2).

We talk about language being more or less formal as a way of describing how we vary our language according to the context we are in: for example, we will all use a relatively informal type of language when we are in the pub, relaxing with friends, compared with the more formal style we are likely to produce in a court of law or in an interview for a job. Formality can also be a reflection of social-group membership, particularly occupation, where some types of occupational language have retained specialist words which can sound very formal in everyday discourse: for example, a financial consultant or solicitor might use the word ‘remuneration’ where the rest of us would use ‘salary’ or just ‘wages’. Calling a type of language formal or informal refers to more than simply vocabulary, but vocabulary will be an important contributory factor in a reader’s impression of the formality of a text. For example, although the words ‘home’, ‘house’, ‘residence’ and ‘domicile’ might refer to exactly the same building, they vary a great deal in formality and therefore to replace one with another in a text will create a very different effect.

To enable you to see what formality of vocabulary might mean in practical terms, read through Text: Levels of formality. In each text, the level of formality has been disrupted at various points by the insertion of inappropriate vocabulary. Can you pinpoint where this happens, and suggest some vocabulary in each case which would be more in keeping with the style of the passage? (Note: there is no commentary on this activity.)

### **Text: Levels of formality**

*Letter from a bank manager to a customer*

Dear Ms Allen,

Thank you for your letter of 1st September, requesting overdraft facilities of £500. In order that this overdraft can be granted we would first need sight of your contract of employment. Would you therefore kindly inform us of the School at which you will now be earning your daily crust.

Yours sincerely,  
A.Curtis

*Teacher's report*

James needs to realise that success is the result of hard work and consistent effort. At present, he is being a real pain because he is so bone idle in class. If he wishes to do well in the examination, and achieve a grade which will do justice to his considerable ability, he must pull his socks up—and sharpish.

*Memo from a university professor to his staff*

Can I remind you that travel claims must be submitted *promptly*.

Other departments, I learn, are not paying claims which are more than two months late. In particular, please remember that the financial year-end is now 31st July. Claims not submitted by 15th August will be substantially delayed by year-end procedures, and screw up our budgeting. Please get you claims in ON TIME.

*Biology exam paper*

Q1 As they pass from testis to oviduct and after mating, mammalian sperms will pass through each of the following

- (a) urethra
- (b) vas deferens
- (c) vagina
- (d) bottom

Q2 When the water in which a certain specis of frog is living contains  $5\text{cm}^3$  of dissolved per litre the frogs remain totally

submerged, but when the oxygen content falls to  $3\text{cm}^3$  per litre they go up to the for a breather.

As a result of reading the information above, do you have any inkling about how frogs breathe in water?

*Extract from a hotel brochure:*

*Reception of Guests*

The Hotel endeavours to have rooms ready to receive guests by noon, and it is hoped that departing guests will courteously assist in making this possible by getting a move on and not hanging about in bedrooms on the day of departure.

### *Activity*

The texts in the previous activity come from genres of writing which tend to have a particular level of formality associated with them (although changes in levels of formality can occur as part of the process of language change).

But the operation of formality is actually more complex and subtle than that: for example, a writer, group of writers or members of an occupational group may write about the same subject in different ways according to the audience they are aiming at, and the purpose of their text.

Texts A-D were found in the same local council city planning department. Each text has a different writer-reader relationship, and a different purpose. These differences are not accidental, but rather arise from the different types of communication expected of the city's professional planners. The texts are placed in the order in which they were written, during a specific process: this was the drawing up of a Development Plan for the city of Manchester, specifying the priorities and intentions for city planning over the decade leading up to the turn of the century.

*Text A* is a piece of national legislation—an extract from the Town and Country Planning Act, 1990. This text, written by lawyers, would be used most often by lawyers and professional planners. Text A is a reference document whose purpose is to establish clear rules and conditions for the planning of developments in any community. The extract here describes the powers of the Secretary of State to intervene if a local planning authority does not fulfil certain obligations.

*Text B* is part of a free newspaper—*City Planning News*—which was delivered to all Manchester households. There were three newspapers altogether; the aim of this one was to encourage members of the public to contribute ideas to the planning department about issues of concern in local communities around the city. It was written by the Head of the Planning and Environmental Health Department.

The two texts here are from different parts of the paper: 'Down Your Street' is an early attempt to summarise some of the material that follows, while 'Can I Extend My Home?'