

TOPICAL COHERENCE IN SPOKEN DISCOURSE*

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1. In comics and cartoons one sometimes comes across composite pictures mostly large format, in which the artist has caught a number of characters whose various actions can often only be worked out from the texts in the accompanying speech balloons. The large number of these speech balloons and the confusion of objects and characters complicates to a considerable extent the interpretation of what the individual events are, since the actions are made comprehensible not merely by relating each speech balloon to one speaker, but above all only by relating two or more speech balloons to one another. As a rule the reader has no difficulty in recognising which speech balloons belong together after he has, by means of a trial and error procedure (starting from an already (pre-) selected part of the data at his disposal), considered other combinations and rejected them as 'not making sense', as 'incoherent' and thus as unacceptable. The competent speaker/hearer (writer/reader) is clearly in a position to recognise utterances 'that belong together', i.e. that form a meaningful and understandable sequence of (often formally connected) utterances. And he is able to do this even when the aid of linear distribution, that is, graphic juxtaposition, is not available. Discourse, one can conclude, is not simply the result of an arbitrary concatenation of utterances which can be permuted at will, and participants know which utterances belong together and which do not. Stubbs (1981 : 117 ff) attempts to demonstrate the existence of intuitions about connection in dialogue texts by testing a number of informants¹. In view of the fact that the linguistic and situational basis for his

* The material in this article appears in a somewhat condensed form in ch. 2.3. of Bublitz (1988).

¹ The informants were presented with the following pieces of discourse: (1) A John, (2) have you got a watch on, (3) B yes, (4) A what time is it, (5) B five fifteen, (6) A is it, (7) B yes, (8) A thanks, (9) B ok. Utterances (1) to (9) were written on nine different cards and the informants were asked (among other things) to put together possible, acceptable and impossible, unacceptable sequences. While, e.g., (4)+(5)+(8) was evaluated as acceptable, (2)+(6), (4)+(7), (1)+(6) etc. were considered unacceptable.

pieces of dialogue is nowhere near wide enough for a useful evaluation of acceptability, his test is certainly questionable. All the same, it seems to have shown that the informants do have intuitions about the correlation of utterances, even within the framework of such a narrow context, and possess the competence to make corresponding judgements about acceptability. There is a close relationship between acceptability in context and coherence in context. Sequences of utterances are classified as acceptable only if they are also coherent, and that means if the evaluator can understand (and describe) them as coherent in the context in which they are embedded (and not in some imaginary context — I shall return to this later).

In this paper I shall consider in somewhat more detail coherence in discourse and in particular topical coherence in spoken discourse. On the basis of the correlation between the subject of description and the research interest on the one hand and the heuristics of the description on the other hand, I shall advocate an empirical approach in which 'coherence' is conceived of as a construct of the analyser's language of description. The subject of description is that variety of spoken English that can be perceived in most of those texts collected in Svartvik/Quirk (1980)². My research interest aims at describing how those pieces of conversation can be said to hang together in a meaningful way, i.e. how they are understood by the participants as well as by the analysing scholar as being coherent. In doing so, I take an analytical, interpretative approach which refers to methodical principles of sociologically oriented conversation analysis (as advocated by Sacks, Schegloff, Jefferson and others), of pragmatics, and of sentence semantics. In describing those pieces of spoken discourse presented here, I shall analyse them, i.e. I start from my understanding as an observer and ascribe speaker and hearer roles, speech act patterns, speaker attitudes, topics and topical action patterns and also coherence to the discourse as a whole and to its various parts.³

2. Referring to everyday usage, one can understand the term 'coherent' initially in the sense of 'fitting together'. However, in linguistic literature there is no generally recognised and uniform definition of 'coherence'. According to the empirical and comprehension-oriented concept of coherence I am arguing for, I would want to say: If a (listening) participant or an analysing observer describes a text, such as an extract from a discourse, as 'coherent', he means that for him the utterances in this extract form a connected, meaningful

² The conversation extracts considered represent spontaneous, informal and usually surreptitiously recorded face-to-face conversations among two to four adult British speakers who are educated to university level.

³ For a comprehensive presentation of this approach (including definitions of concepts like 'speaker', 'hearer', etc.) and for detailed analyses of many more examples cf. Bublitz (1988); for a recent study in sentence semantics cf. von Polenz (1985).

sequence which he can understand and therefore also accept. According to this, coherence is not a text-inherent property, but arises only through the process of interpretation and its consequent ascription by the understanding participant or observer. Consequently, one cannot say 'a text has coherence', but only 'someone understands a text as coherent' (or, if coherence is seen as a text defining condition: 'someone understands a sequence of utterances as a coherent text'); he ascribes coherence to it. Texts gain coherence only by way of a description. So, it can be the case that one and the same text is coherent for person A but not coherent for person B.

In what follows I shall attempt to describe in some detail this notion of coherence by discussing differing approaches and (to a lesser extent, due to lack of space) by analysing a few extracts of conversations (as specified above).

3. There is a distinction made (particularly amongst English speaking scholars) between 'cohesion' and 'coherence' in the description of textual connections⁴. I shall deal very briefly with cohesion, a concept which is also not used uniformly. Grossly simplifying, one can say that as a rule two utterances in a text may be cohesively linked to one another if some kind of connection manifests itself by the use of formal, surface based means. However, while some authors (following van Dijk's (1972) distinction between linear and semantic structure of a text), e.g. Enkvist (1978), apply the term 'cohesion' to the formal connection between utterances and the term 'coherence' to the underlying semantic or even pragmatic relationships, others neither distinguish between these two concepts (e.g. Vuchinich (1977), who speaks only of 'cohesion') nor understand 'cohesion' as a semantic category which manifests itself in the use of formal grammatical and lexical linguistic phenomena (e.g. Halliday/Hasan (1976) and Widdowson (1978 : 28, 52 and passim)). Usually it is agreed that cohesive connection can be given syndetically by coordination, subordination or embedding, using the appropriate formal devices (conjunctions, inverted word order, etc.) or else that it can appear anaphorically or cataphorically in the use of ellipsis, articles or any kind of proforms. If, making use of the toolkit offered e.g. by Halliday/Hasan (1976) (who distinguish between five types of cohesion: reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction, and lexical cohesion), one looks through transcriptions of natural discourse, one immediately asks to what extent these formal means play a role in the interpretation of an utterance sequence as coherent. At a first evaluation (which probably also gave the impetus for dealing with them intensively within the framework of text linguistics), their determining function seems to be considerable. However,

⁴ I shall not go into 'cohesion' and 'coherence' within a sentence, for which these terms are occasionally also used. For established definitions of coherence and cohesion cf. de Beaugrande/Dressler (1981 : 4 f).

a second look makes it clear that cohesion as a surface dependent notion is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for two consecutive utterances to be understood as coherent (and text-forming)⁵. Is its context (not reproduced here) the sequence of the two utterances by *A* and *C* in (1) in fully coherent without being cohesive⁶:

- 1) *a well give us a thumbnail sketch of what you've got out of it then —*
A thumbnail sketch oh God at this stage (— laughs) —
C water is wèt (Svartvik/Quirk 1980 : 591)

On the other hand, the utterances in (2) are connected cohesively with one another, but in the eyes of their authors they do not form coherent texts:

- 2a) *Yesterday morning I was at our bank round the corner. The bank is a terrible building. The buildings in this part of town are horrible. But I like living here. The town has no industry. My brother works in a factory. His boss is a terrible guy.*

(van Dijk 1977 : 53)

- (2b) *I am thinking of Paisley. It is a nice town, it is quite warm. There are houses being built. They pull down houses there, and are building fifteen-and-twenty-storey flats. I think in Scotland and Glasgow there are twenty-storey flats....*

(Reinhart 1980 : 166)

- 2c) *Rubinstein played two sonatas. A play by Synge is called Deidre of the Sorrows. Play and work alternate in this school. Playboy of the Western World is seldom staged.*

(Oomen 1971 : 213)

In order to escape from the inadequacy of a text description model which is based solely on formal (grammatical and lexical) linguistic phenomena in its explanation of "texture" (Halliday/Hasan 1976 : 2), semantic relationships have been adduced to an increased extent. In this way the concept of 'cohesion' has been considerably extended and changed; for a recent attempt at a new definition of cohesion (and coherence) I shall briefly consider Reinhart (1980).

⁵ Vuchinich (1977 : 233) shows that on the other hand the absence of coherence is marked. In this paper, I do not use 'text' as a precisely defined term so that it may appear to designate both coherent and non-coherent sequences of utterances.

⁶ In (1) as in the examples (7), (10) and (11) below I only reproduce those symbols used in the Svartvik/Quirk-transcriptions that are necessary for the analyses given in this paper; they include: 'A', 'B', etc. = speaker identity; 'a', 'b', etc. = non-surreptitious speaker; '*no*' ... '*no*' , '**no**' ... '**no**' = simultaneous talk; '(laughs)' = contextual comment; 'nò' = fall (nucleus); 'nó' = rise; 'nô' = rise-fall; 'nõ' = fall-rise; 'nõ' = level; '·' = brief pause; '—', '— —' and '— — —' = long and very long pauses.

Together with "consistency" and "relevance" (which I am not going to deal with), she treats cohesion (or "connectedness") as the third necessary condition for the coherence of a text. Although at first cohesion is not regarded as a semantic notion (Reinhart 1980 : 164), she later exposes its semantic character and states (1980 : 164):

A text is connected (cohesive) if each adjacent pair of its sentences ... is either
 1. referentially linked ... or 2. linked by a semantic sentence connector.

And she specifies (Reinhart 1980 : 174 f):

Two sentences, S1, S2 are referentially linked if the topic or the scene-setting expression of S2 is referentially controlled by a referent mentioned in S1. [Referential control is given when] the topic or scene-setting expressions corefer with previous expressions but contains a direct mention of a previously mentioned referent [or, and this is reminiscent of the text linguistic concept of 'semantic anaphora' or 'implicit reference', W. B.] the referent of the topic bears membership relations to a class previously mentioned [or] the topic belongs to the same frame or reference

In order to be able to describe as cohesive sequences of utterances which are clearly coherent even if there is no demonstrable referential connection, Reinhart introduces as a second possibility connection by means of a "semantic sentence connector". In (3) the two utterances are not referentially connected, so that the cohesion which Reinhart (1980 : 176) nevertheless claims must depend on the semantic sentence connector "at the very same moment":

- (3) *The first man landed on the moon. At the very same moment, a young boy died in Alabama of untreated pneumonia.*

The list of semantic sentence connectors is extensive and contains lexemes and syntagmas by which semantic relationships are expressed such as cause and effect, comparison and similarity, contrast, time, exemplification, etc. However, these sentence connectors are also typically used for the introduction of new topics (as also in (3)) and are then also said to establish cohesion between utterances (Reinhart 1980 : 168):

[Third condition:] The rightmost sentence contains an overt linguistic marker for the introduction of a new topic, such as syntactic or lexical markers, intonation, pause or segmentation in a written text.

With this extension, if not before, the question naturally arises as to what extent it is still meaningful to differentiate between this very widely drawn concept of cohesion and the concept of coherence. In written texts (and it is only to these that Reinhart refers) every utterance is linked cohesively with its preceding (and following) utterance. It is not quite clear what explanatory power such an all-embracing concept of cohesion can have. One cannot avoid the impression that here Reinhart is attempting to cling to the occasionally postulated principle that in language everything in the content of a sentence

must have a counterpart in the formal representation of this sentence; that what a hearer/reader understands from an utterance must also have a corresponding form. In this apodictic form, that is neither true for the sentence meaning nor for the utterance meaning (which, of course, depends to a large extent on what is situationally implied). One good reason why this is impossible is that even the form of an utterance can frequently, when it is abbreviated by ellipsis or pronominalisation or in a similar way, be reconstructed only on the basis of a process of interpretation which must necessarily draw primarily on non-linguistic data.

In spite of this reservation about laying too much emphasis on the importance of the explicit for the process of understanding, formal means of cohesion should not (and cannot) be ignored in the description of (coherently) connected discourse: to this extent I agree with Reinhart. Certainly, just as for example with German modal particles (cf. Bublitz 1978), cohesive means of expression are not 'indicators' in the sense that one might express them with a definite, context-independent one-to-one relationship with linguistic contents and speech acts. This would prevent the possible varying interpretations of one and the same sentence when it is realised in changing contexts. But one could certainly talk of "traces" (cf. Bublitz 1978 : 30) of coherent connections which function as clues and signposts for the first (and in certain cases provisional and later revised) interpretation. Cohesive means are hearer-oriented signs given by the speaker to suggest a certain deductive process of interpretation; they facilitate the recognition of what belongs together.

Nevertheless, although linguistic means of cohesion do occur quite frequently in those conversations which I investigated, they are only one aid for the ascription of coherence, even if an important one. It seems appropriate to me, when a linguistic cohesive connection is present, to say that the coherence of the utterance sequence also demonstrates itself in a cohesive connection. So, the term 'cohesion' should not be used in the broad sense suggested by Reinhart, but rather kept to designate lexical and grammatical means of connection. She specifically denies that there could be coherent sequences which are not connected referentially or by sentence connector, i.e. cohesively. But this would mean that leaving out the sentence connector "at the very same moment" in (3) would necessarily result in a non-coherent sequence which is highly improbable (but remains speculative without knowing the actual context of (3)). Even with the help of her extremely varied set of syntactic, lexical and in particular semantic tools, Reinhart seems to be unable to demonstrate any cohesive connection in what would then (in all probability) be a coherent sequence.

Coherence does not depend on cohesion, or to put it another way, a section of a text may be perceived as coherent and understood as meaningfully belonging together, even if its parts are not all cohesively linked to one another. The process of interpretation and ascription is determined by various different

factors. To the data on which the participant (or observer) draws belong not only the sentence meaning, but also a large number of contextual and situational factors, primary among which is the mutual knowledge of the participants in the conversation. In view of this, it is reasonable to state that not sequences of sentences (or even sentence meanings, cf. Fritz (1982 : 8), who also disputes this view), but only sequences of utterances can be coherent in the understanding of the interpreter. To say that one particular utterance is coherent can only mean that the hearer (or the analysing reader) can understand it with an utterance meaning that fits within the context of the surrounding utterances (not necessarily the immediately surrounding utterances). Not only single utterances may be said to be coherent (i.e. to fit into the surrounding utterances), but also sections of a discourse or even whole discourses, which are then judged to fit meaningfully into a superordinate section of discourse or into the situational context.

Again I emphasize that I am concerned with the analysis of actual conversation, where each individual utterance can only be judged with reference to its given surroundings. Reinhart's warning (1980 : 162 ff) that a distinction must be made between 'coherence' and 'comprehensibility' is justified, and I shall also observe it. For the point is not that any sequence of utterances can be coherent in some possible context; that is in fact the case and merely requires a little imagination. It is rather that, in judgements about coherence, actual and not constructed sequences of utterances are either coherent or not in their actual surroundings. It is here that I see the difference between 'coherence' and 'comprehensibility'. Even made up sequences of utterances which are said to be non-coherent (and non-acceptable) can always be turned into coherent (and acceptable) sequences in invented surroundings; that is to say, they are always comprehensible in principle. But that is a trivial fact which is totally unimportant for the judgement of coherence in actual conversations.

Since anybody participating directly in the conversation normally has at his disposal more data for his interpretation than the analysing observer (of the transcriptions), the latter must beware of hasty judgements about incoherence. He has to make sure that the participants have come to the same conclusion as he has; this can be determined from their reactions as the conversation proceeds. I shall make this clearer by looking at an example which I have taken from Vuchinich (1977 : 246):

- (4) 1 S: *Well unless you're not a member, if yer a member of TM <=Transcendental Meditation> people do, ah simply because it's such a fucking high price to get in there (1. 0 sec) its like thirty five dollars*
 2 C: *it's like water polo*
 (2. 0 sec)
 3 S: *Why, is it expensive*

In (4) an experiment is carried out; the organiser *C* comes out at particular points, here at 2 *C*, with deliberately non-coherent utterances in order to test the reaction of his partner. The example shows clearly that one and the same utterance (2 *C*) can be judged differently even by the participants as to its coherence. Reinhart (1980: 165 f) (obviously in accordance with *C*) calls (4) non-coherent because 2 *C* does not fulfil the condition of relevance (cf. above). In this way, coherence is regarded as a property independent of the interpreting subject. However, the fact is that in (4) *S* interprets the previous utterance as being coherent. The reply 3 *S* is for the analyser an indisputable indication of this understanding on the part of *S*. Ignoring the possibility that the two-second pause was caused by factors which have nothing to do with *S*'s process of understanding, it can be interpreted as an indication that *S* has not understood *C*'s utterance immediately. Here, that can only mean that the context was not apparent to him because of the not immediately recognisable relevance. However, the following reaction is a clear indication that at this point *S* has understood 2 *C* not only as relevant and meaningful, but also as appropriate to the context, that is to say as coherent.

The question as to whether the well-known examples (5) and (6) are coherent cannot be answered at all in this way:

(5) *We will have guests for lunch. Calderón was a great Spanish writer.*
(van Dijk 1972: 40)

(6) *I wrote my grandmother a letter yesterday, and six men can fit in the back seat of a Ford.*
(Green 1968: 29)

Anyone who undertakes an evaluation of the coherence of (5) and (6) in the isolated form in which they are presented here and rejects them as not coherent, has confused coherence with cohesion (since it is indisputable that — ignoring the function of “and” in (6) — there are no cohesive links). Nothing can be stated about the coherence of (5) and (6) as long as these sequences are not uttered in contexts which can then be taken into account. Similar caution must be exercised when it is wished to make or check a judgement about cohesive but — allegedly — non-coherent utterances as in the examples (2) above. If they are taken from genuine contexts and not constructed, one can accept the authors' evaluation, since for a rejection the analyser has no context available to which he can refer. If, on the other hand, they are constructed, the question of coherence cannot be answered (it shouldn't even arise). This is true at least for the individual texts as a whole, since they lack surrounding contexts. One could only say, and this is how I understand the authors, that individual sequences of utterances in (2) are understood as coherent in the context of the given utterances surrounding them. However, as I see it, in

general constructed texts are (more or less, according to their scope) unsuited to serve as the basis for a judgement about coherence. The analysis of empirical data, such as actual everyday conversations, is, however, a guarantee that this problem will not even arise. The assessments of those directly participating, who express their judgement of non-coherence with phrases like “what has that got to do with...”, “what are you going on about all of a sudden”, “I don't see any connection there with...” or “It hink we're talking about completely different things”, must be accepted by the analyser.

To sum up: coherence cannot be reduced to a matter of grammar and semantics, while this is perfectly possible for cohesion. Coherence is not a text-inherent property, but is ascribed by participants in a conversation (or by observing participants or analysers) to a sequence of utterances in relation to their surroundings. So, one cannot say: a text has coherence, but only: a text achieves coherence. The ascription of coherence is the result of a deductive process of interpretation which is a part of the more general process of understanding. A text is not coherent in itself (even if it is, in a trivial sense, always comprehensible, with more or less imagination), but is understood as coherent in an actual context. Cohesive means of connection play an important role in judgements about coherence. However, cohesion is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for coherence.⁷ If an utterance is understood in context as coherent, then it can normally have ascribed to it a referential, a functional and especially a topical connection with the surrounding utterances. In the following, I shall deal briefly with the concept of ‘topic’, i.e. ‘discourse topic’, as an essential factor in the establishment of coherence before turning to ‘topical coherence’.

4. ‘Discourse topic’ is an independent, usually continuous category which centres the attention of the participants in the conversation, links their linguistic contributions and establishes a connection between them (and with them). In spite of its prominent role in the constitution of discourse, discourse topic (unlike ‘sentence topic’) nevertheless remains a largely unexplained concept within discourse research.⁸ If the following extract (7) from a conversation

⁷ A similar approach to the description of coherence in context is taken by a number of other scholars, e.g. by Levinson (1983: 315), Scherner (1984: 148) and in particular Fritz (1982). Werth (1981: 144) first starts from the assumption that coherence is semantically based. Later, however, he restricts this by saying that the coherence of an utterance could also be based on a relationship between the underlying proposition and the data in the “information pool”. This means nothing other than that an utterance is judged as coherent with reference to the situation and the linguistic context (including the mutual knowledge of the participants).

⁸ Works in which discourse topic stands more or less in the foreground, and on which I shall partly base myself in the following, are those of Bayer (1980), Brown/Yule (1983: 68 ff), Dascal/Katriel (1979), Ochs Keenan/Schieffelin (1976), Reinhart (1982), Schank

is considered and an attempt is made to determine the discourse topics which are treated and the topic under which the whole extract falls, difficulties will soon be encountered. There is no one topic as an entity which is fixed and at the same time both inherent in the text, independent of participants and observers, and unchangeable, with a claim to undisputed validity in context. The ascertaining, or, to put it better, the determining of the topic for the text at hand is (again) a matter of a comprehending, interpretative ascription (by which, of course, inter-subjective unity is to be achieved).

- (7) <1> B <...> tell us a <...> good film to go and see we've heard that *Front Page* was frightfully funny
 c yes
 B but we've missed it we can't find where it's on now it was on in
 <5> *Richmond* last week — it's gone I've looked in the *Evening Standard* and I can't find it for love or money
 c oh it probably isn't in that case — —
 A what about other films —
 <10> B what's a decent film to go and see — —
 <58 lines with several suggestions and comments about films>
 A <...> that lovely cinema in *Victoria* have you been to it the *Biograph*
 c oh yes — no no I haven't. Jo has.
 d oh yes
 <...>
 <15> A what was it like — —
 d oh it was incredible. you. you went in and
 <20 lines about 'The Biograph'>
 c em. also *Blood for Dracula* needs to be seen —.
 B are you sure.
 c also *Shampoo*
 <14 lines about other films and a cinema magazine>
 <20> A yes it must be a real labour to produce that —
 c that's why it cost twenty. twenty p
 <2 lines>
 c I don't buy them — every week. like I u.ed to when the price was reasonable.

(1976), van Dijk (1977 : 130 ff) and in particular Fritz (1982 : 205 ff). Some contributions (usually only on certain aspects of discourse topic) have been produced within American conversation analysis, a list of the titles can be found in Bergmann (1981 : 29); I shall also refer occasionally to Maynard (1980).

In the following I shall use 'topic' always in the sense of 'discourse topic'. If I mean 'sentence topic', I shall write this compound out in full (although I am aware that 'utterance topic' would be more precise).

- d yes that's rather hard
 <25> B oh Jules et Jim òh sob sòb
 c oh Christ
 d yes I tried to go and see that and there was a queue stretching half-way to Buckingham Palace from the ICA
 <26 lines with further suggestions>
 <30> A oh darling let's go and see *Young Frankenstein*
 <...>
 B no darling why don't you go and see *Shampoo* because it's a sharp satire on sex and politics in both America and Hollywood <4 lines>
 <35> it had. *Goldie Hawn* and. *Julie Christie*
 A oh. òh well if it has *Goldie Hawn* I'm going yes where's it on. at
 B *Odeon Haymarket* how on earth are we going to get into that tomorrow night — — <...>
 <6 lines>
 <40> B it's not worth going all that way <...> it's rather a bore isn't it — — —
 just have to wait until films come to *Richmond* — — —
 A out in the suburbs you know we tend to stick to ourselves very much — —
 d what do you get on your local cinemas
 B we get <...>

(Svartvik/Quirk 1980: 628 ff)

As an answer to the question "What have you been talking about?" (put by a newcomer) several variants are conceivable such as:

- (A) At first we were CONSIDERING which films to go and see and then d was TELLING us about a visit to the *Biograph* and then we were CONSIDERING more films worth seeing and then we were DISCUSSING this film magazine and then, again, we were CONSIDERING some more films and finally A and I were REPORTING on (or: TELLING about) our local cinemas.
 (B) We have been TALKING about films and cinemas and film magazines.
 (C) Films.

But presumably the appropriate answer would contain both the naming of the topic-subjects and the complex speech act patterns involved in the form of compact paraphrases as in (D):

- (D) We have been CONSIDERING which films to go and see and in that connection d has TOLD us an amusing story about a visit to the *Biograph* and — just before you came in — A and I have been COMPLAINING about our local cinemas.

By '(discourse) topic' I refer not only to the subject of the (section of the) conversation at hand (the subject matter, what it is about), but also to what was done with it. The discourse topic always arises from the subjects which the participants place in the central point of their speech and the linguistic speech acts which are associated with these subjects. This association should be taken up in the description of the topic by naming the speech act pattern followed by the topic-subject in the form of a prepositional phrase with "about", or as the complement of a constituent clause introduced by "that" (or "whether"). Fritz (1982: 211) (from whom I have borrowed the term '(topic-) subject' ("(Thema-)Gegenstand")) gives a more precise definition of these complements:

Mit verschiedenen Arten von Ergänzungen nimmt man Bezug auf verschiedene Arten von Gegenständen, die das Thema einer Kommunikation sein können. Zu diesen Gegenständen gehören Personen ebenso wie Sachverhalte. Auf die Personen wird mit Eigennamen oder Kennzeichnungen Bezug genommen, auf die Sachverhalte bzw. die Propositionen wird mit *daß*-Ergänzungen Bezug genommen.

In my opinion, not only the speech act but also the topic-subjects should be described as the outcome of a process of interpretation and ascription. Topic-subject is not something which remains unchangeable in context. It does not belong to a conversation or section of a conversation independently of the evaluation of the participant or observer, who ascertains and thereby understands the topic. When in the following I use 'topic' (as an expression in my language of description) in the sense of 'topic-subject', this should always be seen as an abbreviation, since the ever-present neutral speech act pattern TALK need not be specifically mentioned. It must be borne in mind that the description of the topic-subject (together with the naming of the speech act pattern) involves either a proposition, or a single noun, or a complex nominal phrase. According to this, I reject the obligatory identification of the topic of a conversation as a proposition, as is sometimes done.⁹ The decisive point is that the paraphrase of the topic-subject, which can either be lexical or propositional, appears as a complement within the sentence framework which can be reduced to "We have been TALKING about...". The uniformity of this representation is made possible by making the noun follow the preposition directly in lexical complements ("...about films"), whereas in propositional complements the "that"-clause must be preceded by a nominal phrase such as "the fact", or the "whether"-clause must be preceded by a nominal phrase such as "the question". In this way it is possible to give expression to the conviction unanimously represented in research on the

⁹ Cf. e.g. Ochs Keenan/Schieffelin (1976 : 338). For a critique of these attempts to define topic as a proposition, cf. the argumentation of Fritz (1982 : 208 ff) and Bayer (1980 : 216).

subject, that the "aboutness" of the text must be reflected in the description of the topic.¹⁰

The idea of discourse topic expounded here has a parallel in various articles about sentence topic. Drawing on Kuno (1972) and others, Reinhart (1982) has defined the sentence topic neither as the known, or given, or old information, nor as a prosodic or psychological category, but relative to the context as a pragmatic category according to which the information exchanged at any given time is organised and classified. In another place (Reinhart 1982: 173), she also emphasizes: "Given the appropriate context, any expression can be the topic". Here can be seen the germ of an outlook according to which the topic of a sentence, or to put it better, of an utterance, also depends on its ascription by a participant in the conversation, and so can be defined in the same way as the discourse topic.

To sum up: I understand the topic of a (section of a) discourse as the outcome of a process of ascription in which a subject is linked to a complex speech act pattern. Neither the topic-subject nor the speech act pattern requires corresponding predicates, arguments or propositions in the text. The topic is not identical with individual contributions to the discourse (or parts thereof), but it is a category distinguishable from them and superordinate to them (against which they can be measured and evaluated — how "faithful" they remain to the topic, as it were). It binds the attention of the participants in the conversation and provides the framework for the contents of their contributions. So, I do not, as is occasionally done, equate 'topic' and '(topic-) subject', but rather I include in 'topic' the speech act pattern, through the realisation of which the subject is 'turned into speech'.¹¹ And accordingly, I label '(discourse-) topic' the connection between the speech act and the subject linked to it. When ascribed after the event, both topic-subject and speech act pattern can be subject to variation arising from interpretation. (If asked about the overall topic of (7), one can reply not only "films", etc., but also from another viewpoint and with a different weighting "we have been CONTEMPLATING means of passing the time this evening".) The topic description is formulated as a compact paraphrase, in which the degree of compactness

¹⁰ Definitions of topic usually establish a connection with this "aboutness" relationship, as also in articles by American conversation analysts, such as Maynard (1980: 263): "the 'topic' in a conversation is what the conversation is 'about'". Cf. also Bayer (1980: 215 f) and some more recent, extensive reflections on the subject in Carlson (1983 : 237 ff). The initial stage of the idea of discourse topic as advocated in this paper can be seen as long ago as 1976 in Ochs Keenan/Schieffelin (1976 : 374): "On the basis of the utterance itself, prior utterances exchanged and other shared background knowledge, <...> the listener may reconstruct a plausible discourse topic".

¹¹ For a detailed description of the manner in which topics are 'turned into speech' cf. Bublitz (1989).

turns primarily upon the paraphraser's appraisal of the interest of the addressee, and secondarily upon his own interest and his knowledge (is or was he involved in the conversation, was it only related to him later, etc.). The understanding and description of the topic are not left to the whim of the understanding and describing participant, but depend on factors which in principle are accessible to other active or observing participants (disregarding exceptions involving the mutual knowledge of those involved in the conversation), and which are provided by the linguistic and the situational context. For the purposes of my analysis, this methodically controlled procedure for the topic description seems to produce acceptable results. A definition of 'discourse topic' which claims objective and not merely inter-subjective validity, which does not take into account dependence upon the comprehending individual and the context, and which can be formalised, seems to me neither necessary nor indeed even possible.

5. Speakers do not cast their utterances at random into the stream of conversation. Instead they tie them deliberately in to the succession of contributions from all participants and place them at certain points rather than at others. Above all they take care that their utterances form a contribution to the topic in hand and so can be understood by the other participants as 'topically coherent'. However, topical connections are not always evident and can sometimes be traced, even by those directly participating, only after some time, that is to say after further utterances. But since the topic itself is dependent on the comprehension of the participants (and analysers), as we have seen, it comes as no surprise when Fritz (1982: 223) estimates that differences in the understanding of topical connections are among the most frequent sources of misunderstanding and judgements of incoherence. Topical coherence is generally easy to recognise when cohesive elements, semantic or functional relationships exist on a level above the individual utterance. Among the formal means of cohesion are those which I have described as traces of continuing topic and which also include the "semantic sentence connectors" (Reinhart, cf. above). In addition, the co-reference of arguments in consecutive utterances, referential repetitions (cf. Reinhart 1980: 169 f) and the taking up of certain semantic implications and pragmatic presuppositions from the preceding utterance are among the factors which further the understanding of a topical coherence, as do two utterances belonging to the same pattern of a speech act sequence (as with PROPOSE — ACCEPT or DECLINE, QUESTION — ANSWER, etc.). It is only when devices of the kind listed here are not present or recognisable, or when the interpretation of the formal material does not lead to the topical coherence apparently assumed by the direct participants in the conversation, that the interpreter must base himself solely on the context. So, it is not at all unusual for two consecutive utterances to be coherent in

spite of the absence of the aforementioned formal and semantic means, provided that for the participants there is an (understanding and) ascription which is confirmed by the subsequent course of the conversation, which here means principally the reactions of the other participants. It was probably this fact that Sacks was trying to explain when he formulated the principle that 'talking topically' is something different from 'talking about some topic'¹². The second case occurs when two neighbouring utterances refer to one and the same topic without the topic of the first utterance having any relation to the second; the topical relationship then works as it were vertically-paradigmatically and not horizontally-syntagmatically. Neighbouring utterances with reference to a common, superordinate topic occur typically in enumerations of all kinds:

- (8) A *Now, try to remember: What happened on Boxing Day last year?*
 B *We had chicken for lunch.*
 C *David Frost wore a tie that didn't match.*
- (9) A *I'm going to show you a picture and I want you to tell me spontaneously what your first impression is; now then!*
 B *It reminds me of Landseer.*
 C *This little piggy went to market.*
 D *I hate metal frames.*

The answering utterances in (8) and (9) are not irrelevant, incorrectly placed contributions without topical connection which hold up the flow of the discourse, but topically coherent and fully acceptable in their contexts. Any isolation of them, with the loss of their contexts, would of course lead to the loss of the superordinate topic. (Such a case could also be constructed for (5) and (6).) The definition of topical coherence as "a current utterance standing in an appropriate continuous relationship to ongoing talk" (my emphasis, W. B.) in Jefferson (1978: 245), according to which topical coherence is also present when the utterance is in agreement with a superordinate topic, can be adopted only when the point of view represented here permits it. Also the observation of Ochs (1979: 216) that subsequent speakers in their utterances always speak "to the current issue at hand" and the speaker at any time expects that the directly following utterance of his partner will be "on-topic", does not exclude the possibility that the topic is not set with the preceding utterance, but may be already given by the situation (and therefore also given for the preceding utterance).

¹² I conclude that Sacks made this distinction from Coulthard (1977: 77); just as for years the transcriptions of Grice's lectures were available only to a few, so the "lecture notes (1967—1971)" of Sacks have long haunted the bibliographies of various privileged persons to whose number I do not belong.

Basing myself on Sacks's distinction, I shall introduce the following usage: when the speaker sets or provides with his utterance a topic for the immediately following utterance and the following speaker takes up this topic in his utterance, I shall speak of a 'local topic'. When more than one turn can be related to one and the same topic, I shall speak of a 'global topic'. Only in the eventuality that an utterance can be interpreted neither as a contribution to a local topic nor as a contribution to a global topic, shall I speak of this utterance in this context and with this interpretation as not being adapted to its surroundings in a topically coherent manner, so that no topical coherence relationship to any topic-setting utterance can be assigned to it. (Nevertheless, in the same context it can be perfectly acceptable.)

Global topics can extend over short pieces of text, larger extracts, or even whole self-contained texts. In our example (7), the topics listed above (e.g. "we have been CONSIDERING which films to go and see", etc.) are to be counted as global topics. Within the sequences of utterances belonging to these global topics, it is possible to distinguish sub-topics which are often only of local character. In *c*'s utterance in line <17> a new local topic is set: "I SUGGEST that you should go and see Blood for Dracula by INFORMING you that it is worth seeing". This topic is taken up again by *B* in her request "I REQUEST that you should give me reasons for your claim that Blood for Dracula is worth seeing by ASKING you whether you are sure that it is worth seeing". However, *c* does not answer this request, but names another film title, so changing the previous topic, which in this way remains applicable only at a local level.¹³ Nevertheless, I would not want to say that both utterances in line <18> and <19> are not topically coherent. It is rather that they are contributions to the superordinate global topic. Whenever a number of consecutive utterances are contributions to one and the same topic and at the same time this topic is passed on as it were from utterance to utterance, it is the case that at any given point the global topic is also the local topic. For example, in conversation extract (10) each utterance is topically coherent both with the preceding and with the following utterance as regards the local topic, which can be paraphrased as "we are DISCUSSING structuralism", and also as regards the global topic, which is identical with the one set at the local level:

- (10) <1> *B* *what's it about.*
c *structuralism.*
B *oh but he was a great thing about structuralism*
though isn't he

¹³ For a discussion of topical actions like CHANGING A TOPIC, INTRODUCING A TOPIC, DIGRESSING FROM A TOPIC, SHIFTING A TOPIC, BREAKING OFF A TOPIC and CLOSING A TOPIC cf. Bublitz (1988) and Bublitz (1986).

- <5> *A* **what the hell* is structuralism*
c *ah well now. that's another matter altogether*
A *Gordon *how. if.**
c **I can recommend you a book**
B *it's a form of analysis my dear*

(Svartvik/Quirk 1980: 623)

(10) is a good example for my thesis that topic and topical coherence are a matter of (understanding and) ascription, and can also be determined differently given a different interpretation of the data. I regard the given interpretation of (10) as reasonable in the first place on the basis of the utterances, of the situation insofar as it can be reconstructed, and of the knowledge which I have acquired in the analysis of (the transcription of) this passage; it leads me to an understanding of (10) which is not contradicted by the reactions of the participants. To this extent it seems to be inter-subjectively valid; the data can hardly be interpreted in any other way. However, this does not hold true for "Gordon how if" in line <7>. This utterance is so heavily elliptical that neither a speech act pattern nor a topic-subject can be ascribed to it with any degree of certainty. If I include this ellipsis in my statement that (10) contains utterances which are all topically coherent on a local level, this is based on my knowledge and the conclusions drawn from it. From the preceding context I know that "Gordon" can be addressed only to *c*. Since *A* has asked the question about what 'structuralism' is, we may assume that with his "Gordon how if" he is not turning to a new topic, but asking for further information which will help him towards the answer to his question which has not yet been forthcoming. I can further conclude that *c* knows the answer (he introduced the term 'structuralism' as an answer to the question about the topic of a book which belongs to him) and that *A* assumes that too. In fact, "I can recommend you a book" in line <8> could be interpreted as an indirect answer to *A*'s question in <5> and equally as a reaction to the ellipsis in <7>. Even without any knowledge of the further course of the conversation, the ellipsis could be understood in the sense of "I REQUEST you, Gordon, to explain what 'structuralism' is by ASKING you how you could explain it". Accordingly, it would be a defensible result of this process of ascription to describe the ellipsis in <7> as topically coherent in respect to the local topic. *c*, who does in fact give an answer, also seems to have understood the ellipsis in this sense. Yet, there is one other possible interpretation which sees the utterance in <7> as the beginning of a contribution to or about a completely new topic. The following context gives no unambiguous evidence. (The possibility of alternative readings confirms that at least these elliptical forms are always interpreted forms.) It cannot be definitely decided what the pronoun "it" at the end of *A*'s first utterance in the following extract (11) refers to: to the

question of how *c* would explain 'structuralism', or (and this might possibly be supported by the mentioning of the "New Film Theatre" in what follows) to the old camera which belongs to *c* and with which *A* has been playing for some time? At an earlier point in the conversation the suggestion has been raised of selling the old camera to a museum; *A* could be referring to that. If this were the case, then the ellipsis in line <7> could be interpreted as the beginning of a new topic. The interpretation of the whole extract of conversation in (10) would have to be altered in that respect. I reproduce in (11) the passage immediately following (10) and leave it to the reader to make his own ascription:

- (11) *A* if you were <...> sort of — uneducated and philistine what would you do about it
c *well I am. and I don't* do anything
A *would you begin to relate* — — òh
c **ə: m**
A **but you do you go** to the National Film Theatre and things like that don't you.
c ə: m for a drink — —
A that's a very cool way of doing it — I'm afraid this one'll have to go to a museum now cos it cos I've unscrewed the

(Svartvik/Quirk 1980: 624)

However, a warning must be sounded: the understanding of heavily elliptical utterances which then leads to a removal of the shortening, that is a completion of the utterance, frequently requires from the person not directly involved (who, e.g., cannot take into account non-verbal signals) conclusions which are highly speculative. Therefore it is advisable either to tolerate alternative readings, and indeed to give them consideration as far as the available data permit, or to refrain from any kind of interpretation. There does not seem to me to be anything wrong with this: the description can only go as far as the available data permit. All the information available to those directly involved cannot possibly be known to the analyser (or indeed sometimes to one or other of the participants), not even if, e.g., he uses video recordings for his evaluation. It is not necessary for him to know it either, if — as in the present paper — the important questions can be answered without it.

The global topic which dominates a more or less self-contained passage can be summed up by very compact, general paraphrases ("we are TALKING about...", "to-day's panel is about..."), which can also be given by the participants as a reason for the conversation ("we came together because we wanted to TALK about...", "tonight we've met because...", "this discussion has been arranged with the intention of shedding some light on..."). Paraphrases of this kind frequently convey the global or local topic of a complete

conversation. However, for everyday conversations it is mostly the case that there is not just one global topic, but that they are characteristically determined by a more or less heterogeneous collection of individual topics which refer to one another and are derived from one another or from the situation (so that there are a number of 'scarlet threads' intertwined and knotted together, some of which run through the whole text, others only through parts of it). The exceptions to this are everyday conversations about which something like "we've only been TALKING about the cup final and about nothing else" can be said. But the essential point is that even during such a conversation a change of the global topic could have been introduced at any point, without disturbing the situation. The reactions of the participants would be completely different in a discourse coming under the heading of consultation, interview or debate, in the course of which one partner introduced a topic completely divergent from the agreed topic. For these types of discourse it is an essential feature that they deal with, or at least should deal with, one or more global topics established beforehand by common consent. Such a global topic draws the framework within which these sub-topics are chosen. Together they form a hierarchic structure with the global topic at the top (e.g. a formal discussion: "we have been DISCUSSING the present state of the economy"), and a number of sub-topics at a lower level ("...the value of the pound", "...the forthcoming budget", "...the recent miners' strike", etc.). Within these sub-topics (which are global topics for their own section), fragmentation into further sub-topics may again occur in the course of the discussion ("...comparison of the strength of the pound with the mark", "...comparison... with the franc", etc.). Each one of these topics is related to the global topic of the whole discourse (i.e. the debate, discussion, etc.) and does not step outside the predetermined framework upon which the participants have agreed. The hierarchic structure could be portrayed graphically in the form of a tree. The tree-diagram for a normal, spontaneous, everyday conversation would look different. Since there would be no predetermined overall topic which would cover all the topics occurring, the topical structure would not resemble a pyramid rising to a single point. Instead, the outcome would be a number of partial hierarchies, each in the form of a pyramid. These global topics (such as "we were TELLING each other about our summer holidays", "we were DISCUSSING the pros and cons of our local kindergarten", "we were COMMENTING on the new TV course 'Meditation in the Lotus Position'", etc.) need not stand beside one another as discrete blocks, that is, be dealt with one after the other. On the contrary, they frequently overlap, run on concurrently, receive later additions, etc. This relative lack of order, which cannot be foreseen (or easily directed), and the absence of predetermination of topics before the beginning of the conversation, are typical for everyday conversations.

6. To sum up: in order to analyse coherence in actual, spontaneous, everyday English conversations (of the type documented in (7), (10) and (11) above) it seems to me to be necessary to advocate an empirical approach based on observation and interpretation and not on the application of introspectively gained and prematurely postulated theoretical notions and categories. Coherence is conceived as a construct of my (i.e. the analyser's and retrospectively participating observer's) language of description. Consequently, I ascribe coherence to an utterance, a sequence of utterances, a whole conversation. My understanding follows from the direct participants' understanding, as it can be observed from the data provided by the transcriptions. Coherence is not a text-inherent property but dependent upon the comprehending participant: thus, coherence is (in this special sense) not text-based but participant-based. Sequences of utterances can only be judged to be coherent in (some actual) context. The understanding of a sequence of utterances as coherent in context is based on lexical and grammatical means of cohesion, if present, and, among other factors, on their 'topic-conformity'. An utterance is topically coherent when it is understood as a contribution to the local or to the global topic at hand.

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