

Building Coherence and Cohesion: Task-oriented Dialogue in English and Spanish

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Building Coherence and Cohesion by Maite Taboada presents a detailed account of selected aspects of the discourse of *scheduling dialogs*, which are conversations between two people trying to arrange a meeting. These dialogs, which had been recorded in a laboratory as part of the JANUS project, were held in English and in Spanish, totaling 1380 conversations (881 in English and 499 in Spanish). Of these, the author selected 60 for the investigation, 30 for each language, and carried out all analyses by hand.

The general goal was to reveal some of the discourse features that interactants use to build coherence and cohesion in scheduling dialogs in English and in Spanish. In order to meet this goal, four major features (or “tools,” page 1) were chosen for analysis: theme, rhetorical structure, cohesion, and staging. The choice of these characteristics was motivated by what the author describes as a wish to “study connexity and coherence at all levels” (page 1), and it reflects the major theoretical orientation of the study, systemic functional linguistics.

Chapter 1 is the introduction to the study, outlining the questions that were explored in the investigation. Chapter 2 provides an overview of the theoretical framework, drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin to lay the groundwork for a definition of genre as relatively stable speech events. The remainder of the chapter deals with the notions of register and generic structure from a systemic functional perspective. Chapter 3 presents details of the collection and handling of the data. Chapters 4 through 7 form the core of the study, each focusing on one discourse feature.

The initial discourse feature covered in the book is *theme* (chapter 4). This refers to the Hallidayan notion of the first ideational element of a clause (Halliday 1985); *ideational* means an element that is part of the transitivity system (the verb and its complements). The remainder of the clause is called *rheme*. Theme has been studied in systemic functional linguistics as a means of describing how text and talk flow from one clause to the next. Theme can be classified in a number of ways, the main one being in relation to *markedness*. A marked theme occurs when an ideational element other than the subject appears in initial position in the clause (e.g., *yesterday* in *Yesterday, he said he'd be here*). The first part of the chapter is dedicated to comparing the different kinds of theme in the English and Spanish dialogs. The main difference was that Spanish speakers used more marked themes than English speakers (21% to 9%, page 78). This was mainly because Spanish speakers used *processes* (verbs) as theme, whereas English speakers used the subject (page 81). The second part of the chapter discusses thematic progression, which refers to the patterns formed by sequences of themes. The main difference between the two languages was that in Spanish, thematic progression was

very often (71%) broken by new themes (those “not related to any linguistic material preceding” them, page 93), which was caused by the variation of verbs in clause-initial position, whereas in English the majority of clauses (54%) were linked by some kind of simple progression pattern (for instance, a sequence of clauses relating to each other through the repetition of a pronoun in thematic position).

The second discourse feature covered in the study is *rhetorical structure* (chapter 5), which was based on Mann and Thompson’s (1988) rhetorical structure theory. The first part of the chapter focuses on the frequency of relations in the dialogs. The results indicated that the main rhetorical relation in both languages was *elaboration*, which accounted for about 28% of the total relations in English and 21% in Spanish (page 122). This relation took place whenever speakers added detail about “the situation or some element of subject matter” (page 126). There were some minor differences, though, between the two language groups: Spanish speakers tended to use more *volitional result* relations (7% vs 3%) in order to express the desired consequence (a change in the agendas or a preference for an outcome, page 132), whereas English speakers employed more *nonvolitional result* relations (7% to 4%) in order to protect the other speaker’s face (page 129). The second part of the chapter deals with the discourse markers associated with each rhetorical relation. In English, the main markers were *but*, *so*, and *if*. Most markers showed a clear preference for one particular relation (*but* co-occurred with *concession*, *so* with *nonvolitional result*, and so on, page 151). In Spanish, *pero*, *porque*, and *así que* were the most frequent markers, realizing mainly *concession*, *nonvolitional cause*, and *volitional result*, respectively (page 152).

The third discourse feature is *cohesion* (chapter 6), whose basis was Halliday and Hasan’s (1976) work. The chapter is divided into three parts. The first part deals with cohesion types; it presents detailed frequencies for the different kinds of cohesive relations proposed by Halliday and Hasan. The results showed that the main cohesion type in both languages was overwhelmingly lexical: This accounted for 84% of all cohesion in Spanish and for 70% in English (page 170). In addition, the main type of lexical cohesion in both languages was repetition of the same word (44% in Spanish and 30% in English). The second part of the chapter (which is just two pages long) refers to the distance between cohesive devices. For both languages, the distance was similar, at about three to four clauses (page 175). The final part of the chapter, which is devoted to the length of chains and the number of chains per dialog, shows these measures to be similar between languages (about four chains per dialog, with about five to seven items per cohesive chain, page 177).

The final discourse feature explored in the study is *staging* (chapter 7), which refers to the division of dialogs into functional segments (blocks of speech turns). In the first part of the chapter, the author provides the following general stage sequence for the dialogs: an optional opening, a date proposal, a place proposal, and a closing (page 182). Date proposal and place proposal were the main stages, being obligatory in both languages. The second part of the chapter focuses on the speech acts uttered by the participants in each stage. The most frequent speech act was *inform*, accounting for about 50% of all speech-act occurrences in both languages (page 190). In the final part, Taboada discusses how the stages were realized in terms of theme, rhetorical structures, and cohesion.

Chapter 8 (entitled “Conclusions and consequences”) provides a closing to the volume. This is a very short chapter (just four pages long) that does not offer an actual summary of the analyses. I felt the need for a recapitulation of the main findings and how they all contributed to the construction of coherence and cohesion in the scheduling conversations, especially with respect to the main similarities and differ-

ences between English and Spanish. Granted, some of that had already been covered in chapter 7, but from the point of view of staging. In addition, there was no discussion on how the findings contribute to the vast previous literature on cohesion and coherence in text linguistics and discourse analysis. The chapter ends with a paragraph in which the author claims that her findings can serve as input for a computational model to process task-oriented dialogs, in machine translation, text generation, and information retrieval. There are no details on how this might be accomplished. This is not a major flaw, though, since the book was not written with a computational linguistics readership in mind.

My general appraisal is that the book is a good companion for an applied linguist, text linguist, systemicist, or discourse analyst, especially, in my view, those with an interest in Spanish spoken data. The book is less useful to a computational linguist or corpus linguist; it neither tackles the issue of how to carry out discourse analysis by computational means, nor does it suggest ways to annotate discourse features manually in electronic corpora.

A few general problems should be pointed out. The first is that since the dialogs were collected under experimental conditions, they may diverge from authentic dialogs in many ways, which in turn affects the extent to which the results can be generalized to real-life situations. The second problem is the lack of statistical tests comparing frequencies between the two languages; there are plenty of claims about differences and similarities between the two languages throughout the volume (related to research question 4, which explicitly refers to significant differences between English and Spanish), but some of these might not be statistically significant. Finally, although each chapter ends with a summary section, these summaries do not focus on the actual findings.

These problems notwithstanding, *Building Coherence and Cohesion* is a rich source of information on key discourse-organization features. The book is a welcome addition to research in both systemic functional linguistics and contrastive discourse analysis. It offers valuable insights into theme identification and progression, rhetorical structure theory, Halliday and Hasan's work on cohesion, and functional discourse segmentation. The reader will find no shortage of frequency counts, examples, and extensive reviews of the literature for each main discourse feature. In conclusion, it should be of interest to readers seeking an in-depth investigation of these issues, both quantitatively and qualitatively.

References

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| <p>Halliday, Michael A. K. 1985. <i>An Introduction to Functional Grammar</i>. Arnold, London.</p> <p>Halliday, Michael A. K. and Ruqaiya Hasan. 1976. <i>Cohesion in English</i>. Longman, London.</p> | <p>Mann, William C. and Sandra A. Thompson. 1988. Rhetorical structure theory: A theory of textual organization. <i>Text</i>, 8(3):243–281.</p> |
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