Discourse Analysis

Discourse Analysis, the study of stretches of text in context, has been implemented within a wide variety of theoretical and empirical frameworks, concerning a broad range of linguistic and socio-linguistic phenomena. In Modern Hebrew the investigation covers, among other sub-fields, areas as diverse as genre analysis and stylistics, conversation analysis, coherence and cohesion, discourse markers, issues in translation, acquisition of discourse skills, speech acts, the interfaces between text and sentential structure and, less prototypically, but very interestingly, computational parameters.

The original view, whereby the relevant unit of analysis extends beyond the sentence (e.g., Abadi 1988) had to be reassessed in view of units smaller than the sentence, the realization of which is conditioned by the larger linguistic and extra-linguistic context (e.g., Borochovsky Bar-Aba 2007; 2010). A related issue concerns the particular nature of the data under examination, and it has become evident with time that specific varieties of discourse lend themselves to different analytical and empirical tests and raise distinct research questions. Thus, the spoken mode has been studied extensively within the methodology of conversation analysis, which, naturally, concentrates on dialogues (e.g., Maschler 2009a; 2009b). Significantly, even the apparently clear-cut distinction between spoken and written varieties of discourse has been characterized as overly simplistic, and so the proposal has been made (Izre’el 2002) to draw a finer distinction in the spoken mode between spontaneous דיבור davur and non-spontaneous מדור medubar speech. With very few exceptions (e.g., Maschler 2004), in the initial phases of research the data was mostly sporadic. However, the construction of the Corpus of Spoken Israeli Hebrew (in progress; see Izre’el et al. 2001; Izre’el and Rahav 2004) promises to rectify this situation. This corpus is intended to provide linguistic and socio-linguistic data on the basis of which statistically significant generalizations can be made and typicality of structures can be ascertained.

Among the sub-fields studied within Discourse Analysis are genres, registers, and stylistics. Thus, along with characterizations of narrative prose, the language of novels, drama and skits (e.g., Abadi 2010; Ben-Shahar 1990; 2003; Weizman 2000), there are close examinations of poetic language (e.g., Livnat 2005; Sovran 2002; 2006), and stylistic generalizations concerning spontaneous spoken monologues (e.g., Livnat and Yatziv 2010), the language of the media, interviews, politics, law and science (e.g., Burstein 2005; Livnat 2003; 2010; Weizman 2008), and issues related to translation with their obvious socio-linguistic ramifications (e.g., Ben-Shahar 1994; Kuzar 2002).

Since the pioneering research by Halliday and Hassan (1976), in which a basic distinction is drawn between text coherence, the thematic holding together of the text, and cohesion in text, the property shared by the linguistic devices that make the text units adhere, the study of discourse in Hebrew has been characterized, in part, by attempts to identify factors contributing to coherence and examine various cohesive devices. Among the contributions in this domain are Abadi (1995), in which the coherence/incoherence in stories by S. Y. Agnon is examined, and markers whose function is to maintain coherence are investigated. Such markers are discussed, for example, in Ariel’s (1998) analysis of הביא bare ‘behold, here is, indeed’, Livnat and Yatziv’s (2003) study of כי ki ‘for, because’, Yatziv and Livnat’s (2006) survey of the uses of אז az ‘then, at that time’ and Ziv’s (2008) study of מה ma ‘what’. Prototypical contributions to the research on cohesive devices are, e.g., Shloush’s (1998) discussion of הביאש beqişur ‘in short’ and some of Maschler’s (2009b) observations concerning טוב ov ‘good, well’ and הביאש beqişur ‘in short’, especially with respect to the organization of the text, including segmentation, shifting, and change of topic.

Discourse markers have become a significant topic in discourse analysis over the past two decades. Their characterization clearly depends on the theoretical perspective adopted. Thus, Maschler (2009a; 2009b) studies them within conversation analysis and claims that they must
fulfill a metalingual function and should prototypically occur at intonation-unit initial position. She argues that their metalingual function can be (a) meta-textual, as in the case of the organizational marker be-qisur ‘in short’ (b) interpersonal, as in the case of the impatience marker ma ‘come on’ or (c) cognitive, as in the case of the rephrasing or hedging by means of הַכָּל ‘like, as if’. Several other studies of discourse markers have been conducted within the theoretical framework of Relevance Theory (Sperber and Wilson 1986; 1995), where Grice’s Cooperative Principle of interpretation (Grice 1975) is replaced by cognitive considerations controlled by relevance parameters. These investigations (e.g., Ariel 1998; Shloush 1998; Ziv 1998; 2008) consider the extra-sentential status of discourse markers as a defining property and adopt the relevance-theoretic distinction between conceptual and procedural meaning (e.g., Blakemore 1987), where truth conditional meaning differs from procedural meaning (e.g., Blakemore 1987), the theoretic distinction between conceptual and procedural parameters. These investigations (e.g., Ariel 1998; Shloush 1998; Ziv 1998; 2008) consider the extra-sentential status of discourse markers as a defining property and adopt the relevance-theoretic distinction between conceptual and procedural meaning (e.g., Blakemore 1987), where truth conditional meaning differs from procedural meaning (e.g., Blakemore 1987), the theoretic distinction between conceptual and procedural meaning (e.g., Blakemore 1987).

It is clear that in this example לִבּוֹ נֶקֶד means 'you are more like a teacher' which is a discourse marker indicating the speaker is about to make an argument. The discourse marker is used to introduce a new idea or point in the conversation. It is commonly used to signal a change in the topic or to focus the audience's attention on the speaker's message.

In particular, these involve close investigations of the syntactic and semantic properties of discourse markers and their role in the overall discourse structure. These studies have contributed to a better understanding of how discourse markers function in natural language communication and how they can be used to analyze and interpret spoken and written discourse.
of the possible correlations between the content and organization of major discourse units and their sub-parts on the one hand, and the structure of sentences on the other. Thus, for example, the discourse factors conditioning the occurrence of topicalized sentences, where a non-canonical word order occurs initially, are examined. Recentness of mention of a referent or a piece of information and textual as well as extra-linguistic givenness turn out to be relevant parameters in the occurrence of sentence-initial topics (e.g., Giora 1985; Ziv 1996; Birner and Ward 1998). This is evident in:

We stopped at the side of the road. To our right stood a giant statue. On the statue (there) was an inscription.

However, focal elements which occur sentence initially display ill-formedness in exactly the same discourse environments, precisely because they present new, non-predictable discourse entities (e.g., Lambrecht 1994).

Recent investigations within Discourse Analysis have indicated that in addition to the familiar language skills, discourse skills too must be acquired (see Blum Kulka 2002.) It has been demonstrated that the distinction between the various genres, registers, and modes, along with the morphological and syntactic devices that are at their service, are mastered at a relatively advanced age in adolescence. The acquisition of expository prose skills, for example, entails the use of sophisticated lexical information and command of complex morphological, syntactic, and discourse strategies (see, e.g., Ravid and Tolchinsky 2002; Berman and Nir-Sagiv 2004; Ravid and Berman 2006). A recent study (Nir-Sagiv and Berman 2010) examines complex syntax from a discourse perspective and proposes a hierarchy of complexity of clause-combining relations, investigating the different rhetorical strategies for which the various structures are used. An additional study, which concerns the spontaneous spoken mode (Ravid 2002), demonstrates the way spontaneity factors impose constraints which have to be manipulated in order to optimize the expressive parameters for expository purposes at advanced stages of the acquisition of discourse skills.

Interestingly, topics involving processing and translation, interpreting and answering questions, and transfer from the written to the spoken mode and vice versa have also been among the issues investigated within Computational Linguistics (e.g., Wintner 2002). Additional issues concerning the computational parameters involved in the assessment of discourse referents, the relation between discourse and sentence structure, and those affecting coherence have also been studied (e.g., Grosz and Sidner 1986; Grosz 1995; Grosz and Ziv 1998). In the absence of an overall theory of Discourse Analysis, the diversity of studies within the vast range of theoretical and empirical frameworks will, hopefully, shed light on the human capacity to produce and interpret stretches of text in a variety of contexts (→ Grounding; Fronting; Topic; Focus).

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