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Chapter 1

Thinking about the Text

In this chapter we look at the relations between words that make up discourse, specifically the links between words that join them into what linguists call a text. We then examine some features of spoken conversations, a genre of text that is of particular interest to discourse analysts because of its high frequency in daily life and its special function as a means of creating and maintaining social relations.

Look at the letters abc in that order. You’ll probably think of them as the first three letters of the alphabet. One of the first songs many children learn is the alphabet song, so people will often think of the alphabet when they see abc.

Now look at the letters in the order cab. You’ll now recognise them as a word. As a regular user of English, you know a surprising number of words. At the time you started school you probably knew a few thousand words. By the time you became an adult you knew tens of thousands.

You might not use tens of thousands of words regularly, but you know them when you see them. For example, you probably talk about going up a staircase or climbing the stairs quite regularly, but I doubt you often say that you ascend the stairs, even if you recognise that word. That’s the difference between your productive language skills (speaking and writing) and your receptive language skills (listening and reading). Most of the time when we produce language, we rely on comfortable words that we use often. When we receive language, we’re able to understand many more words, even if we rarely use them ourselves.

You might not be an English teacher or a linguist, but you certainly have a lot of tools in your head for determining what is acceptable in English and what is not. Returning to our three letters, what if
they were in the order bac? A doctor or nurse might think of bac as the initialism for “blood alcohol content”, but that should be written BAC, as initialisms are usually written in capital letters. Although you realise that bac is not a word on its own, you will quickly see that it could be part of a word such as back, tobacco or even antibacterial if you add more letters.

Now consider the letters in the order acb. That doesn’t look like a possible pattern for letters in an English word, even if we add more letters. Your spelling tool, the accumulation of knowledge you have that tells you what works and what doesn’t work in English, probably can’t do anything with the combination acb. As a regular user of English, you’re pretty good at recognising which patterns of letters are allowed and which patterns are not.

Note that we are looking at written words here, but if we were talking to each other in person about this, you could think the same way about the possible sound combinations of English. Some sound patterns are possible, some are not and some only occur at times. (This is the study of phonology, the sound system of languages.) For example, we don’t usually start words with a t sound followed by an s sound in English. When pronouncing a word like tsunami that English borrowed from Japanese, some people won’t be sure whether we should try to pronounce the t or not. Is it pronounced tsu-na-mi or su-na-mi? There isn’t really a correct answer to this. It depends on whether you want to pronounce the word like a Japanese person would, or in a way that sounds English. (Most English speakers don’t have a problem pronouncing a ts sound at the end of words, of course. Think of rabbits and habits.)

When you think about how letters are organised through spelling rules into written words or about how sounds are organised through phonological rules into spoken words, you’re taking advantage of one of the tools you have in your head for analysing language. When you looked at acb and decided that it was not part of an English word, you were drawing on your knowledge of spelling, your spelling tool, to analyse that letter combination.

You have another tool at your disposal to help you think about how language works. It tells you how the words that you know are organised into acceptable patterns. This tool is called grammar. Grammar is an odd word. Some people grow up learning English, they speak it regularly, they hear it on TV and radio, they write emails and text
messages and they read English books, magazines and newspapers. They use grammar to recognise acceptable patterns of words constantly, yet they regularly say things like “I’m really bad at English grammar.” What they mean, I think, is that they can’t explain grammar: they don’t remember the difference between active and passive voice, they can’t recall what a gerund is and so on. Of course they are good at using grammar. If they weren’t, they wouldn’t be able to say or write anything that made sense.

When you read or hear “He ate the apple”, you know that it is grammatically acceptable. It makes sense. You’re relying on some of the rules of grammar that you know to analyse those four words and decide that together they make up an acceptable English sentence. If you see “The apple he ate”, you probably get a feeling that those words are possible in that order but more words are needed to make it complete. “The apple he ate was delicious” is one way you could turn those four words into a complete sentence. What about “Ate apple the he?” I don’t think you can do anything to make that into a sentence. Those are four words that are not organised properly. Just as you knew that cab was a possible pattern of letters but acb wasn’t, your knowledge of grammar tells you which patterns of words are possible and which are not.

This chapter is not about spelling, phonology or grammar. It is about words and sentences, either written or spoken, that are important linguistic units to consider when we discuss the organisation of language. Sounds are organised into words through phonological rules, and words are organised into sentences through grammatical rules. For many people, their education about the various linguistic units stopped at that point, but linguists often talk about the next level of linguistic unit, one bigger than words and sentences. They call this next level a text.

People use text to mean a variety of things: a text message, a textbook, and words on a computer screen could each be called text. That’s fine. People use words to mean different things depending on what they are talking about. Linguists know those definitions of text, but they also use the word text as a convenient way of referring to all kinds of different types of language. Linguists use text to mean “a set of coherent words that present a message”. All of the words in the text work together, that is, they are coherent, to create a message bigger than any one word on its own. This means that things
we might normally think of as texts, such as textbooks, novels and Shakespeare’s plays, are texts, but so are things that might not be immediately obvious, such as recipes, bus schedules, songs, newspaper articles and instruction manuals.

Sometimes people seem shy about using the word *text* to refer to these everyday things. They recall their school teachers calling great works of literature *texts*, so it may seem that calling a recipe for chicken soup a text is a bit silly. It’s common to feel a bit odd using words in new ways. I’ve heard people say they don’t like ordering coffee from Starbucks because they are expected to say *short* and *tall* instead of *small* and *large*. (Or is a *tall* a medium and a *grande* a large?) We’re comfortable using words that we know because we know precisely how to use them. You might feel like you were being pompous if you were to use the phrase *acute myocardial infarction* instead of the common one *heart attack*.

Linguists are not calling things *texts* to be pompous. They use the word because it is a convenient way to refer to things that have some elements in common, although they may be quite different in other ways.

**Cohesion**

Returning to the chicken soup I mentioned earlier, how can long, complex novels have something in common with a short, simple recipe for a hot lunch? The first thing to consider when looking at what defines a text is to think about how the words in the text are connected to each other in a way that makes it clear that they belong together. Halliday and Hasan (1976), in their influential book *Cohesion in English*, explain that *cohesion* is the collective name for all of those links that connect the different parts of a text. Look at the following sentence:

1.1
We showed it to him yesterday, but he forgot.

You certainly understand all of the words in that sentence. You know that it means roughly “More than one person showed something to
Thinking about the Text

one person yesterday, but the person who was showed forgot.” More specifically, you know that *him*, for example, refers to a single male being, probably a human, but maybe an animal or alien. You know how *him* works, but you don’t actually know who *him* is here, do you? *Him* is a form of reference, a word that has some meaning on its own, but has a more specific meaning if we refer somewhere else in the text. *Him* refers to someone, but we don’t know who he is. This is the difference between a word that you understand and a word that is interpretable. A word that is interpretable is a word that refers specifically to someone or something. *Him* in 1.1 is uninterpretable because you know the word’s usual function, but you don’t know what it really means. If we add another sentence, you’ll see that you know more about *him*.

1.2
Vikram said he hadn’t seen the book before. We showed it to him yesterday, but he forgot.

Now you can see what *him* means very specifically. *Him* refers to Vikram. In 1.2 *him* is interpretable, as we know that it refers to Vikram and only Vikram. It doesn’t refer to any other person in this text, although of course in other texts, *him* would refer to someone else. Halliday and Hasan explained this property of *him* and similar words by saying that these words presuppose something else. When we see these words, we know how they work, but we also know that we need more information to interpret them. In 1.2 you had to look back in the text to interpret *him*. This is called anaphoric reference. This process of looking back applies to either looking back through the printed words of a written text or to looking back in time through the words of a spoken text.

Those things that are being referred back to can be called either referents or antecedents. In the previous example the reference *him* refers to the referent Vikram. The words reference and referent complement each other nicely in form, but sometimes when we talk, they can be confusing as reference sounds like the plural form referents. I’ve often been asked, “Did you say reference or referents?”, so I tend to say antecedent.

It is also possible to refer forward to words that will come later in the text. This is called cataphoric reference. When someone says,
“Listen to this”, the word this is uninterpretable. You don’t know what it means until the person continues to talk. Using cataphoric reference is a way of engaging someone in the text. Saying “Listen to this”, might signal that the speaker is about to tell a new joke, explain something important or deliver some exciting news.

Toni Morrison’s novel Paradise starts with the sentence “They shoot the white girl first”, which is an excellent example of how cataphoric reference can draw readers into a story. Those six words create several questions in readers’ minds. Who are they? Who is the white girl? (The is also a reference, as it points at a specific person here, but we don’t know who she is yet.) Why was she shot?

Anaphoric reference and cataphoric reference are known together as endophoric reference, which means that they refer to words that are found in the text. The other words in the text can be called the co-text, so an endophoric reference refers to something in the co-text, the words that the reference appears with.

There are also references that refer to things outside of the text. When someone says, “Look at that” and points, we don’t know what that is from the person’s words, we will only know from looking at whatever is being pointed at. This is known as exophoric reference. An exophoric reference refers to the context, which is the physical space or situation in which the text is produced. (Think of the en in endophoric as meaning in the text and the exo in exophoric as meaning exit or out of the text. That’s how I remember them.) When you’re talking to someone in person, it is often convenient to use exophoric references to the context in which you’re talking because you can both see the same things (“Do you want this?”) and hear the same things (“What was that noise?”). When an author writes a book, he or she doesn’t usually know where someone will read it, so it is difficult to use exophoric references, but there can still be numerous endophoric references to the co-text because the reader can look back and forth through the words.

Look back at 1.2. (Vikram said he hadn’t seen the book before. We showed it to him yesterday, but he forgot.) You should now be able to see that it in the second sentence is interpretable because it is an anaphoric reference, pointing back to the book. We, on the other hand, is uninterpretable. We don’t know who we is here. It’s more than one person, but we don’t know which people. (Note that we is also interesting as it can be inclusive or exclusive. Inclusive we
refers to both the speaker and the listener, such as when I say “We should have lunch together sometime”, to you. **Exclusive we** refers to the speaker and other people, but doesn’t include the listener, as in “We’d appreciate it if you’d be quiet for a minute.”

Cohesion, as Halliday and Hasan define it, is like glue that holds the text together. Glue is adhesive, meaning it sticks to other things, but glue is also cohesive, meaning it sticks to itself. In the same way, different parts of a text have to be sticky or cohesive. As you read or listen to a text, you encounter numerous words like *him*, *they* and *it*, which refer anaphorically or cataphorically to other parts of the text. Since you’re reading or listening to the whole text, you can interpret these words and see how they help different sections of the text stick together. You can see that the whole text, despite being made up of many words and sentences, belongs together as a linguistic unit.

Someone who comes into the room part-way through a speech or who starts reading a book in the middle will find many of the references uninterpretable. When you pass people on the street, you’ll often hear them say things like, “She said so but he didn’t think we should use the green one.” There are several words in that sentence that presuppose that the information being referred to can be found elsewhere in the text, which shows that we can’t understand language by looking at individual words or sentences. We have to analyse the text as a distinct linguistic unit in order to make sense of it. In the following section we will look in more detail at the five major categories of cohesion: reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction and lexical cohesion.

**Reference – personal reference**

Halliday and Hasan (1976) list three types of reference: personal, demonstrative and comparative. Personal references are those which, not surprisingly, are often used to refer to people.

Subjects – I, you, he, she, it, we, they
Objects – me, you, him, her, it, us, them
Possessive modifiers – my, your, his, her, its, our, their
Possessive heads – mine, yours, his, hers, its, ours, theirs
Of course these don’t all have to refer to people. *They* could refer to *chairs*, *them* could refer to *snakes* and *it* could refer to almost anything except people, but it is easy to remember these by recalling that they often refer to people. (To be fair, we do sometimes call people *it*. When you answer the phone, you might ask, “Who is it?” and not mean to give offense. On the other hand, asking someone, “Do you know it?” while pointing at another person would be quite rude.)

It is important to mention that these words are sometimes called **pronouns**, as your school teacher might have called them. You may wonder if what you learnt in school was wrong, but the answer is “No.” We can talk about things using different words, depending on what we want to explain. Sometimes it is correct to call me a father, sometimes a husband, sometimes a man and so on. Similarly, *I*, *you* and the other words are pronouns when we want to describe them in some situations, but when we want to call them by what they do, **personal reference** is the best term because they commonly refer to people.

Personal references have all of those properties that were explained earlier. (When I talked about *him* earlier, I was talking about personal reference, although I did not use the term.) They presuppose that their antecedents can be found outside the text (exophoric reference) or inside the text (endophoric reference). If the antecedent is inside the text, it will be found either earlier in the text (anaphoric reference) or later in the text (cataphoric reference). In all of these cases, the personal reference is interpretable as meaning something specific.

**Generalised exophoric references** are a special type of reference that are used to refer to everyone or to unspecified people. These commonly appear in aphorisms like “One never knows what might happen”, where the reference *one* refers to people in general, not to any specific person in the text. *They* is also often used this way, such as in “They say it’s going to rain.” Who says so? Meteorologists on television? The newspaper’s weather reporters? No specific person or people are referred to, but we are not really concerned with who specifically, so we just use *they* to point generally at someone who might likely have said it.

**Extended text references** are those where *it* is used to refer to a larger section of text than just a word or phrase. Compare the
meaning of *it* in the following two examples, a modified version of an example found in Halliday and Hasan (1976).

1.3
1. He lost his phone. It was expensive.
2. He lost his phone. It was pretty careless.

In 1.3.1 *it* refers to “his phone”, a noun phrase. This is personal reference. Note that it wouldn’t matter if the first sentence of 1.3.1 was “He lost his expensive black Samsung phone.” In this case *it* would refer to more words of the co-text, “his expensive black Samsung phone”, but this is still just a noun phrase. In 1.3.2, however, *it* refers to more than just the phone. Here, *it* refers to the act of “losing his phone”. This is extended text reference, as it refers to both the verb “lost” and the noun phrase “his phone” together.

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**Exercise – personal reference**

Identify personal references in the following sentences. Decide whether the references are anaphoric (pointing back in the text), cataphoric (pointing forward in the text) or exophoric (pointing outside of the text). Identify what the references presuppose.

1. When a man is tired of London, he is tired of life. – Samuel Johnson
2. Just do it. – Nike
3. Before she went home, Sally had to say goodbye to Ellen Ferguson. – Kit Reed

**Exercise – personal reference (commentary)**

In sentence 1 the anaphoric personal reference *he* presupposes *a man*. More accurately we should say that *he* presupposes “a man who is tired of London”, as *he* doesn’t refer to men generally; only those who are “tired of London” must also be “tired of life.” Anaphoric reference is much more common than cataphoric reference in most texts.
In sentence 2 it is an exophoric reference. It doesn’t refer to anything in the text. Readers are free to decide for themselves what they should “Just do.” Exophoric references are common in advertisements: “Because I’m worth it” (L’Oreal), “I’m lovin’ it” (McDonald’s) and “Have it your way” (Burger King). In all of these cases it is left for the reader to decide what it refers to.

In sentence 3 she is a cataphoric reference that presupposes Sally, or more specifically “the Sally that had to say goodbye to Ellen Ferguson”. It’s always good to remember that references are very specific. No other Sally is referred to here, only this specific one.

Reference – demonstrative reference

this, that, these, those, here, there, now, then, the

Demonstrative references usually refer to things in terms of their proximity to the text’s producer. (For convenience, we can refer to a speaker or writer of a text as the producer, and the listener or reader as the receiver.) If I say, “Look at this”, you know to look somewhere near me. If I say, “Look at that”, you know to look somewhere other than near me. It’s helpful to remember that demonstrative references often point at (or demonstrate) where something is. These references are selective, as they force the user to choose to identify something as being near or far. Using this is more precise than that because this means “near me”, but that means “anywhere except near me.”

It is important not to confuse the demonstrative that with the relative pronoun that. The relative pronoun that in a sentence like “The dog that we saw was really old” is not pointing at anything. In this sentence that joins “We saw a dog” and “The dog was old” into one sentence. Remember that the demonstrative that points while the relative that joins.

This and that can also be used as either heads or modifiers. Heads are the main or only words of phrases. In “Look at this” the word this is a head. Modifiers are words that accompany other words, giving more information about heads. In “Look at this pen” the word this is a modifier as it tells us more about which pen to look at. (Pen is a head in “Look at this pen.”)
The word *the* is also a demonstrative as it is used to point at things. However, *the* is **non-selective**, as it doesn’t tell us about how proximal (close) or distal (far) the referent is. Compare *this pen*, which points to a pen that is close to me, *that pen*, which points to a pen that is not close to me and *the pen*, which points to a specific pen, but without explaining whether or not it is close.

People learning English are sometimes confused by *the*, because some languages only have selective demonstrative references like *this* and *that*, so speakers of those languages are used to always selecting references based on distance. They’re not sure about *the*, which doesn’t let you choose how far away something is. On the other hand, English is not as precisely selective as some other languages, which have three selective demonstrative references. In Japanese and Korean, to name two examples, speakers must select between “near me”, “near you” and “not near me or near you”. When I learnt to speak some Japanese, I often said things like “Look at that (near you) speeding car” when I meant “Look at that (not near you) speeding car.” I think I made a lot of Japanese people nervous.

*This* and *that* are not only used to point at physical items like pens and cars. These demonstratives can also be used to point at identifiable sections of text. If I say, “Listen to this”, the demonstrative *this* refers cataphorically forward in time to whatever I’m about to say. After I finish talking, my wife might say, “I’ve already heard that”, where *that* refers anaphorically back in time to whatever I just said. In the following sentence from Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake*, think about how readers would interpret the word *that*: “She can hear him, he needs to believe that, but she’s giving him the silent treatment.” Readers know *that* presupposes “she can hear him”, so Atwood doesn’t have to write it again.

There are other demonstrative references. *Here* and *there* are usually used to point at physical locations. If I say, “Look over here”, you must be able to see me to interpret where *here* is. This is an exophoric reference as the word *here* refers to the context in which I say it. If I send you an email saying “Let’s meet there at noon”, you will know I’m using *there* to point at a place, but you’ll need more information to interpret what *there* refers to. If your previous email to me suggested meeting at a restaurant called
The Fat Duck for lunch, you’ll know that there refers to “at The Fat Duck” and nowhere else.

**Note – demonstrative there and existential there**

Don’t confuse demonstrative reference there with the existential there, which appears in sentences like “There’s a funny smell in this room.” In this sentence there is used as a subject; it is not pointing at anything. “There’s a funny smell in this room” means something like “A funny smell in this room exists.” Similar uses of existential there appear in sentences like “There are three reasons…” (“Three reasons exist…”) and “There was a game starting at 4 pm.” (“A game starting at 4 pm existed.”)

You can often distinguish the existential there from demonstrative reference there in spoken texts by the way they are said. Look at the word there, which appears twice in the first part of Shel Silverstein’s poem *Bear in There*.

There’s a Polar Bear
In our Frigidaire–
He likes it ’cause it’s cold in there.

The first there is existential. It has a grammatical role as a subject, but doesn’t mean anything other than “A Polar Bear exists in our Frigidaire.” We can signal this when we talk by saying something like “Thur’s a Polar Bear…” The first there’s unimportance in meaning allows us to say it quickly and with little stress. The second there is a demonstrative reference that presupposes “In our Frigidaire”. We don’t say “…cold in thur” for the second there; instead we say it clearly.

*Now* and *then* are also demonstrative references, but they refer to times. It’s difficult to use now to mean anything other than “at the present time”, but then can mean whatever time is specified elsewhere in the co-text or context. When my daughter says, “Pick me up after school”, and I say, “See you then”, I mean “See you when I pick you up after school.”
Reference – comparative reference

The final category is **comparative reference**, in which one section of the text is interpreted by comparing it to some other section of the co-text. In the sentence “This tree is taller than that tree”, we don’t know the exact height of “this tree”, but we know that on a scale of “tallness” it is taller than “that tree”. It is tempting to say that the trees are being compared in terms of *height*, but there are other ways of measuring height (i.e. *shorter*), so it is best to recognise that *taller* compares the trees on a scale of “tallness” only. Comparative reference is also commonly used to compare on a scale of quantifiable units, as in “This tree is taller than three metres.”

Comparative references are made through the use of the comparative forms of adjectives. In the case of the adjective *big*, for example, the base form is *big*, the comparative is *bigger* and the superlative is *biggest*. When a text producer uses the base form, *big*, as in “Use a big bowl” in a recipe book, readers are asked to interpret *big* in relation to their general knowledge of the size of bowls, but they are not asked to compare *big* to anything in the text. (Consider that it would be difficult to interpret “Use a *big* flange” if you don’t know anything about the usual size of a flange.)

The superlative form, as in “Use your biggest bowl”, asks readers to interpret *biggest* in relation to the context in which they are receiving the text. For each reader this will be different depending on the size of the bowls they possess. As with the base form *big*, *biggest* demands an interpretation based on something outside of the text.

The comparative form of the adjective makes reference to the context for interpretation. In the following pair of sentences how do readers make sense of *bigger*? “Use a big bowl to prepare the icing. Use a bigger bowl to prepare the batter.” Readers will know that bowls can only be *bigger* in relation to other bowls. In this case the second sentence doesn’t provide any point of comparison, but the first sentence does, leading to the interpretation “Use a bigger bowl (*than the big bowl used to prepare the icing*) to prepare the batter.”

Not all adjectives use *er* in the comparative form. Some comparative adjectives are irregular, such as *good-better* and *bad-worse*. (*Far* and *old* are sometimes confusing as each has two comparative forms, *farther* and *further* and *older* and *elder*.) Some polysyllabic adjectives use the form *more+base form*, as in *more beautiful* and
more intelligent. The general rule is that adjectives of one syllable use the \textit{er} form and adjectives of three or more syllables use the \textit{more+base form}. There is some ambiguity as to whether we should use \textit{er} or \textit{more+base} with two syllable words. Is the comparative form of \textit{lovely} either \textit{lovelier} or \textit{more lovely}? Notice that William Shakespeare used \textit{more lovely} while Russian painter Wassily Kadinsky used \textit{lovelier}.

Shakespeare – Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day? Thou art more lovely and more temperate.

Kandinsky – An empty canvas is a living wonder ... far lovelier than certain pictures.

(Keen-eyed readers will also have spotted that Shakespeare used \textit{more+base} for \textit{temperate}, which could be pronounced as a three-syllable word. You see now why I called the previous rule a “general” one.)

Take care to distinguish between \textit{more} in the \textit{more+base} form, which compares a quality (Shakespeare’s \textit{more lovely} compares \textit{thee} to \textit{a summer’s day} in terms of “loveliness”) and \textit{more} on its own, which compares amounts. In the following example \textit{more} compares the amount of \textit{40 pounds} to the amount of \textit{money we need}: “It’s going to cost 40 pounds. We need more money.”

\textbf{Note – clauses}

A \textit{clause} is a subject and a predicate. A \textit{predicate} is a verb and anything else that says something about the subject. So a clause is a subject, a verb and anything remaining that is related to that subject. In the following sentences the subjects are in bold and the predicates are in italics.

1. Arianna \textbf{plays piano beautifully}.
2. My wife’s brother’s daughter \textbf{has studied piano for ten years}.
3. Jessica \textit{sang the song} and Arianna \textbf{played the piano}.

It’s more precise to refer to clauses than to sentences, as one sentence can contain more than one clause. In sentence 3 above, there are two clauses, but it is only one sentence. Think of \textit{sentence} as being a description of the orthography, that is, a sentence is a group
Thinking about the Text

of words starting with a capital letter and ending with terminal punctuation: full stop, question mark or exclamation mark. Think of clause as being a description of the grammar, that is, subject, verb and anything else that relates to that subject.

Recognising and analysing clauses are important to thinking about communication. In the NWA song Express Yourself, rapper Dr Dre says, “It gets funky when you got a subject and a predicate.” I’m not sure about the “funky” part, but it is clear that to “express yourself” you do need both the subject and the predicate. If you’re only given a subject, such as the doctor, you don’t know what the doctor did. If you’re only given a predicate, such as gathered the grapes, you don’t know who or what did it.

Substitution

Substitution, like reference, is a form of cohesive relation in that different words, phrases and clauses are linked, joining them into a text-level linguistic unit. Only a few words act as substitutes. One, ones and same are nominal substitutes, which means they are words that can take the place of nouns. The verb do in all its forms – do, does, did, done, has done, has been doing and so on – is the verbal substitute, taking the place of verbs or parts of verbs. The clausal substitutes so and not take the place of clauses and parts of clauses.

Look at the word one in the following sentence from Bram Stoker’s Dracula. What does the word one presuppose here? “I trust that your journey from London has been a happy one, and that you will enjoy your stay in my beautiful land.” You’ll see that the nominal one substitutes for the noun journey in this example.

Substitution is similar to reference in that one word presupposes another word or words, but reference and substitution are not the same. Compare the meaning of it and one in the following two examples.

1.4
1. I have a red pen. Do you want it?
2. I need my red pen. Do you want the blue one?
In 1.4.1, you’ve seen that *it* refers to “the red pen that I have”. The personal reference *it* in the second sentence presupposes the exact same thing that was already mentioned in the first sentence. In 1.4.2, you’ve recognised that *one* in the second sentence substitutes for *pen*, but we are now talking about a different pen than the pen mentioned in the first sentence. Substitution involves **repudiation**, which means that we are still referring to the same general class of things, but to a different specific item in that class. In 1.4.2 the nominal substitute *one* repudiates *red* with *blue*, so we are still talking about pens, but a blue pen, not a red one. The substitute *one* presupposes the head *pen*, but repudiates the modifier *red*.

The nominal substitute *one* is not the same as the cardinal number *one*. **Cardinal numbers** are used for counting: one dog, two cats, three sheep and so on. Look at the following example sentences and determine what *ones* substitutes for. “I need my red pens. You can have the blue ones.” Here you can see that *ones* substitutes for *pens* and repudiates *red* again, but we don’t know how many pens we are talking about. The nominal substitutes are not counting things, but are instead replacing their antecedents.

Look at the sentences in 1.5, more examples from *Dracula*, and determine what *do* in 1.5.1 and *so* in 1.5.2 presuppose.

1.5

1. If this book should ever reach Mina before I do, let it bring my goodbye.
2. Lord Godalming had slipped away for a few minutes, but now he returned. He held up a little silver whistle as he remarked, “That old place may be full of rats, and if so, I’ve got an antidote on call.”

In 1.5.1 *do* substitutes for “reach Mina” and repudiates *the book* with *I*. (The sentence is still about the general case of “reaching Mina”, but the specific thing that is doing the reaching is now *I*, not *the book*.) This *do* is a verbal substitute. It doesn’t have any meaning on its own, unlike the **lexical verb** *do* in “Do your homework, please” which means “perform” or “attempt to complete”. We can only interpret the verbal substitute *do* in 1.5.1 by looking at its context “If this book should ever reach Mina”.

In 1.5.2 the clausal substitute *so* presupposes “that old place may be full of rats”. This is a clause because it contains both a subject
“that old place” and a verb “may be”. However, we can see that the substitute *so* should be read as “… and if that old place *is* (not ‘may be’) full of rats, I’ve got…” This is the repudiation.

The clausal substitute *not* functions as *so*, except that it changes the polarity of the clause it substitutes for. **Polarity** refers to whether the verb is positive (“It *is* almost time to go”) or negative (“It *isn’t* time to go yet”). Polarity doesn’t have anything to do with whether the meaning is positive or negative, so “Fraser lost his job” displays positive polarity, even though Fraser will be unhappy about being laid off.

In 1.6, look at how the clausal substitutes *so* and *not* allow the someone to affirm or deny something without repeating an entire clause.

1.6  
1. Lily: Is she going to the party?  
   Ngozi: I think so. (*so = “she is going to the party”)  
2. Lily: Is she going to the party?  
   Ngozi: I think not. (*not = “she is not going to the party”)  

It is especially noticeable here that *so* and *not* substitute for something someone else said. Substitution, like all cohesive relations in texts, doesn’t only take place within the words that the producer uses. We can also make links between things we say or write and things others have said or written.

**Ellipsis**

Like substitution, ellipsis involves the replacement of one thing with another. However, instead of using words as substitutes, in ellipsis we replace words with nothing. This may seem odd in theory, but in practice we do it constantly. When you read “Mia went home and ate dinner” you know Mia did two things: *went home* and *ate dinner*. You interpret Mia as the subject of the verbs *went* and *ate*, even though Mia was only mentioned once. There is **nominal ellipsis**, the omission of a noun which can be found elsewhere in the co-text. The sentence could have been written “Mia went home and Mia ate dinner”, but it was not necessary to do so because the
subject of the second verb, *ate*, couldn’t be anyone else but *Mia*. (Using *Mia* twice may in fact be somewhat confusing. We are so accustomed to nominal ellipsis in sentences like this that seeing *Mia* as the subject of *ate* may lead us to wonder if this is a different person also named Mia.)

We sometimes have trouble spotting these omissions when we read or hear language, probably because we are so used to interpreting ellipsis without thinking about it. Slowing down our interpretation of language to identify ellipsis is not something we normally do, but we certainly use ellipsis in speaking and writing quite commonly.

In the short novel *The Metamorphosis*, Franz Kafka describes a man’s reaction to having been turned into a large insect. Look at the following excerpt and identify places where Kafka omitted the subject *he* from the words.

1.7 “He felt a slight itch up on his belly; pushed himself slowly up on his back towards the headboard so that he could lift his head better; found where the itch was, and saw that it was covered with lots of little white spots…”

You will have seen that *he* appears in meaning, although not in the words, before three verbs: (he) *pushed*, (he) *found* and (he) *saw*. Kafka relied on his readers’ successful interpretation of ellipsis, making additional uses of *he* unnecessary.

As with substitution, there are three types of ellipsis: nominal ellipsis, verbal ellipsis and clausal ellipsis. It is **verbal ellipsis** when all or part of the verb is omitted, but is understood from the surrounding text. Similarly, **clausal ellipsis** entails the omission of an entire clause, or at least both the subject and the verb of the clause.

1.8 1. He said that he’d eaten sushi before. He hadn’t, but it seemed embarrassing to admit the truth.
2. Over three hours the CEO talked about the company, changes to procurement procedures and new health regulations.

In 1.8.1 *eaten sushi before* has been omitted after “He hadn’t” in the second sentence. This is verbal ellipsis because part of the verb *had*
eaten has been omitted, but the subject he remains in the text. The second sentence is interpreted as “He hadn’t (eaten sushi before), but it seemed embarrassing to admit the truth.”

In 1.8.2, the CEO and talked about have been omitted before both “changes to procurement procedures” and “new health regulations” in the second sentence. This is clausal ellipsis as both the subject the CEO and the verb talked have been omitted. This is interpreted as “Over three hours the CEO talked about the company, (the CEO talked about) changes to procurement procedures and (the CEO talked about) new health regulations. We can see that the words the CEO talked about are optional in the text’s written form, but are present in the text’s meaning whether or not they appear.

Exercise – ellipsis

Identify examples of ellipsis in the following sentences. Explain which words are missing from the text. Think about which elements of the text (nouns, verbs or clauses) could have been inserted, but were omitted because the same words already appeared.

1. You can’t deny laughter; when it comes, it plops down in your favorite chair and stays as long as it wants. – *Hearts in Atlantis* by Stephen King.

2. It does not do to dwell on dreams and forget to live. – *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* by J. K. Rowling.

Exercise – ellipsis (commentary)

To recognise the ellipsis in sentence 1, ask yourself “What stays as long as it wants?” The answer is laughter, so this is nominal ellipsis. The word laughter or the personal reference it could have appeared before stays but was omitted here as readers know the word is there in the meaning, if not in the actual text.

Sentence 2 could have been written as “It does not do to dwell on dreams and it does not do to forget to live.” This is clausal ellipsis, as the subject it and the verb does not do have both been omitted. It was
not necessary to write *it does not do to* twice, as readers presuppose the existence of the second one by looking back in the text.

## Conjunctions

Conjunctions are used to show specific types of connection in texts. Comedian Rodney Dangerfield said, “My wife and I were happy for twenty years. Then we met.” The temporal conjunction *then* shows that there is a time relation between the first sentence and the second, that is, the first one happened before the second one. Dangerfield’s joke relies on the conjunction, as most listeners would likely assume at first that he meant he and his wife were happy together for twenty years after they met.

Although it is common for receivers of texts to assume that sentences heard or read first also come first chronologically, this doesn’t have to be so. Consider “He let himself in quietly. First, of course, he had to find his door keys, not the easiest thing to do noiselessly in his current state.” In the preceding sentences the second clause in the sequence, “he had to find his door keys”, comes chronologically before the first clause “He let himself in…”, as indicated by the temporal conjunction *first*.

The four types of conjunction and their simplest forms are as follows:

1. **Temporal *then*** (time relation) “I went home *then* I ate dinner.” As explained above, *then* shows that the two events are linked in chronological sequence. (Don’t confuse the temporal conjunction *then* in this example with the demonstrative reference *then* in “It starts at 5 o’clock. I’ll see you *then*.” Here *then* presupposes “at 5 o’clock.”)

2. **Causal *so*** (cause-and-effect relation) “I went home *so* I could eat dinner.” Here *so* shows that the first clause “I went home…” caused the possibility (“could”) of eating dinner.

3. **Adversative *but*** (unexpected relation) “I went home *but* there was nothing for dinner.” By using *but* the author makes it explicit that going home led to the expectation of eating dinner, which in this case was not possible (“nothing for dinner”).

4. **Additive *and*** – adding relation “I went home. And before I knew it, dinner was served.” Additive *and* is sometimes confusing.
People are tempted to say that *and* means *then* here because they guess that “going home” happened before the “serving of dinner”. However, this is information the reader is inserting into the text based on knowledge of eating dinner at home. The *and* in the clause simply tells the reader to take the clauses as being related, or add them, but doesn’t specifically say what kind of relation the two clauses have.

We can sometimes interpret the relation between clauses without a conjunction by relying on other available information. If you read “It’s cold. Wear a jacket”, you know that being cold is unpleasant and that wearing a jacket keeps you warm. You take the two clauses and attempt to make them coherent based on your knowledge of the world. (Coherence, the relation between texts and their receivers, as opposed to cohesion, the relation between words in a text, will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.) There is enough relation between *cold* and *jacket* that we could describe them as weak collocations of each other, which helps us see the relation between the clauses despite the fact that the conjunction is left implicit. The text’s writer could also choose to make the relation between clauses explicit. In “It’s cold, so wear a jacket”, the causal conjunction *so* provides the explicit link between *cold* and *wear a jacket*. “Because it is cold, wear a jacket” shows the same relation, this time through the use of the causal conjunction *because*. In these examples the causal conjunctions *so* and *because* provide an explicit link, one that is visible in the text and doesn’t only exist in the reader’s mind, and so they are cohesive.

**Lexical cohesion**

Words are not only related to each other in terms of how they refer to or substitute for one another. **Lexical cohesion** is the term Halliday and Hasan (1976) used to describe how the meanings of words create links in text. Think about the word *duck*. What does it mean? You know some possible meanings, but without more co-text you can’t say precisely. In a discussion of farm animals you will interpret *duck* as a bird as you will hear the names of other farm animals in the text. As you read a restaurant menu, you will interpret *duck* as a cooked meal as you will see the names of other foods listed. The duck that
swims in a pond and the duck we eat are not the same thing, but the word *duck* on its own is not enough for us to know which sense is meant if I ask you, “What does *duck* mean?” You can only determine which sense of *duck* I’m using once you have a co-text to work with, words like *farm, cow* and *pond* or *restaurant, menu* and *beef*. (Of course, in an active children’s game that includes words like *jump* and *run*, you will probably interpret *duck* as “lower your head”.)

Words like *farm, cow* and *duck* are **collocations**, meaning they are words that tend to appear close to each other in texts. After we mention *farm* we don’t have to mention *duck*, but *duck* is more likely to appear in the co-text of *farm* than other words like *helicopter, pastry* or *ninja*. This is not to say that *farm* and *ninja* can’t appear together in specific types of text, for example in stories about feudal-era Japan, but we are unlikely to guess that such words would appear together in general texts.

Remember *collocation* by noting it has the word *location* in it. Collocations are words that tend to appear in the same place. Researchers in **corpus linguistics**, which is the simultaneous analysis of large numbers of texts, can use computer programmes to determine how likely some words are to be collocations of other words. They can even see how close certain words will often be to other words. You don’t need to have a computer to make such determinations, however, as it is often enough to rely on intuition. A mention of *farm* will allow you to predict the appearance of farm-related words because you already know quite a bit about what can be found and done on a farm, even if you aren’t a farmer. Of course, your intuition could be wrong. Not all farms have *tractors, horses* and *fields*. In a text about *server farms* you’d see different collocations: *computer, network, processor* and so on.

Some words are very **strong collocations**, meaning they are highly likely to appear together in texts, or even side by side. The opposite of *fresh breath* is usually *bad breath*, but the opposite of *fresh bread* is *stale bread*. These words collocate so strongly that mixing them around either sounds odd (*good breath*) or changes the meaning of what is being said (*stale bread* is old, but *bad bread* doesn’t taste good). When you’re learning a foreign language, it can sometimes be difficult to recognise that some word combinations don’t exist because they are not common collocations, even though they may make sense together. *Circumstances* collocates
with *unusual* ("unusual circumstances") quite often, but less often with *weird*, even though *weird* and *unusual* are *synonyms* (words that have the same or very similar meanings) in many ways. Native English speakers who are not familiar with the concept of collocation are sometimes at a loss to explain these patterns in English, even though they use the patterns precisely. A quick way to have a rough look at possible collocational strength is to google the two words while putting them in quotation marks. *Unusual circumstances* is more than ten times as common together as *weird circumstances*.

Other strong collocations don’t necessarily appear side by side, but are highly likely to appear together. *Sons* collocates quite strongly with *daughters*, to the extent that people sometimes say things like “I have two sons but no daughters” when asked if they have any children. Mentioning *daughters* is unnecessary here – people will assume there are none if they are not mentioned – but the strong collocation between *sons* and *daughters* seems to bring the word *daughters* into a text with *sons* in it. Sons and daughters can be described as being in the same *collocational field*. They don’t necessarily appear right together, but the mention of one makes the mention of the other more likely.

Determining the difference between strong collocations and weak collocations is not a precise distinction unless you first determine which frequencies will count as strong or weak. Corpus linguistics, in which precise, computer-aided counts can be made, is a powerful tool for making such distinctions, but not everyone has access to *corpora* (bodies of linguistic) and the software for doing so. Nevertheless, it can be useful to call collocations *strong* or *weak* to distinguish between them in a general way. *Sons* and *daughters* collocate strongly with *parents*. *Sons* and *daughters* are weaker collocations of *aunt* and *uncle*. A discussion of familial relations is more likely to mention someone’s parents than their parents’ sisters and brothers. Weaker still is the link between *sons*, *daughters* and *teachers*. Of course, people who are teachers may have sons and daughters, but when discussing *teachers* we are more likely to mention *students*.

Numerous useful terms exist for discussing the relations between some collocations more precisely. *Meronyms* are words that mean part of a thing, but are used to represent the whole. If you read “His car needed to be repaired. The engine was broken”, you recognise
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that the two sentences are cohesive because an engine is a part of a car. Car and engine are collocations, but engine is more precisely a meronym of car. You would also recognise a link between repaired and broken, as repair and break are antonyms, words that have opposite meanings.

We often see that texts are lexically cohesive through reiteration, the mention of the same things more than once in the text. Sometimes this is as simple as direct repetition, using the same word twice. Seeing run in different sentences in a text is a clue that those sentences are related. Repetition includes different forms of a word: run, ran, runner and running are related even though they are not identical. These differences are described through morphology, \((\text{morph} = \text{“change”}, \text{ology} = \text{“study of”})\). The a in ran indicates that this is the past tense of the present tense run, the er suffix on runner indicates that this is a noun (“person who runs”) and the ing suffix indicates that this is either a gerund (a verb used as a noun) as in “Running is good exercise” or part of a present continuous verb, as in “The dog is running around the park.” Despite the morphological differences, we can see that run, ran, runner and running are repetitions of the same essential meaning. (See Chapter 3 for a note on morphology.)

Reiteration also includes synonymy, which was previously described as the relation between words with the same meaning. Child and kid might be called synonyms as they both mean “young person”. This is the denotation, or primary literal meaning, of those two words. However, like most synonyms these are not identical in all ways. Child may make us think or feel positively about the innocence and naivety of the people being described. These are the connotations, the feelings and non-literal meanings of the word. Kid has different, sometimes negative, connotations: rambunctious, overactive and troublesome. The movie Kids, about sexually active, drug-using young teenagers, likely took its name from these connotations of kid. (Brat, meaning “troublesome child”, includes the negative feelings in its denotation, which has led friends of mine to refuse to buy their daughters Bratz dolls.) Synonyms are also sometimes different in how formal or informal they are. Child is more formal than kid, so a science textbook or doctor would be more likely to use child. (Even more formally, a child could be a “sexually immature human”.) Synonyms are also not always the same in all
senses of the words. In one sense, *kid* means “child”, but in another *kid* means “young goat”.

Finally, reiteration includes **subordination** and **superordination**. Subordinates are types of something, so a *Honda Jazz* is a subordinate of *car*, and *car* is a subordinate of *vehicle*. In this hierarchy, *Honda Jazz* is thus also a subordinate of *vehicle*. To describe the relationship between these words starting at the top of the hierarchy, *vehicle* is a superordinate of *car*, and *car* is a superordinate of *Honda Jazz*. Be careful about the distinction between **meronymy** and ordination; *engine* is a meronym of *car* because an engine is part of a car, but an engine is not a type of car, so it is not a subordinate of *car*.

The discussion of lexical cohesion is a discussion of content words. **Content words** are, as their name implies, those words that have at least some meaning on their own, without referring elsewhere in the text. These are the words in the word categories that tell us what the text is about: nouns, adjectives and adverbs. These words are **open-class words**, meaning we can add new words to these categories as times change, introduce new words such as *camera* and *computer* as new technologies are developed and introduce new words such as *selfie* and *Facebook* as new social practices arise that take advantage of those new technologies. Open-class words can easily be moved into new categories, as the noun *friend* did when people started using it as a verb in “I friended her on Facebook.” (Linguistic conservatives may not like these changes, but they must acknowledge that they have happened.) You can often communicate simple thoughts using only content words, for instance by pointing at your stomach and saying “Hungry.”

**Function words** are those which help with the grammar of sentences. These words don’t make much sense on their own: articles, prepositions, auxiliary and modal verbs and so on. These words are largely **closed-class words**, meaning we don’t easily add new words in these categories. You can certainly think of new content words you have learnt recently, perhaps even as you have been reading this book, but I doubt you can recall having come across a new preposition (*in, on, under, behind, to, of* and so on) since you first learnt English. The references and substitutes discussed earlier in this chapter are function words (and non-words, in the case of ellipsis), so they rely on co-text for their meanings to be interpretable.
The meaning of cohesion

Thus far in this chapter you have read about texts, and in particular how the study of cohesion provides us with accurate terms to use when we describe the relations between different parts of a text. This is not to say that you did not previously understand texts when you read them, of course, but as a linguist, and more precisely as a discourse analyst, it is important that you’re able to describe these relations accurately. You can’t analyse discourse, as it was described in the Introduction, without being able to analyse the relations between the words that make up the text of the discourse. Halliday and Hasan (1976) argue that it is especially important to recognise non-structural cohesion, which are those links that connect words in different sentences, as opposed to structural cohesion, which are those links that connect words within the same sentence.

So, for example, in “He had won the victory over himself”, the penultimate sentence of George Orwell’s novel 1984, we know that He is the subject, had is an auxiliary verb-marking tense, won is the main verb, the victory is the object and over himself is a prepositional phrase that explains more about the victory. We can see the link between He, the first word of the sentence, and himself, the final word, partly because we know about grammar, but also because himself is a personal reference. This is structural cohesion.

Now look at that sentence and the final sentence of 1984 together: “He had won the victory over himself. He loved Big Brother.” There are no grammatical links to rely on to see us the relation between the two sentences. The grammar of the first sentence ended at himself. Now, the only link between the two sentences is the He in the second one. This is non-structural cohesion. Despite the fact that the two sentences are grammatically independent from the other, we see them as part of one semantic unit called a text, which is, assuming we read the whole way through, Orwell’s novel.

Exercise – cohesion

Find examples of cohesion in the following text, a recipe for chicken stew from the BBC Good Food website. A commentary on some of the cohesive links follows.
Heat the sunflower oil in a large pan. Use a larger one if you plan to double the recipe to preserve some soup for freezing. Fry the garlic for 5 minutes, making sure to stir it repeatedly. Pour in the stock slowly to avoid splashing. Then stir in the potatoes and spices.

Add the chicken and boil the mixture. Stir in the carrots and remaining vegetables. Cover the pan and simmer for 45 minutes. Make sure to stir the stew every few minutes. Once the chicken is tender the stew is ready. Serve with fresh pepper.

Cool and freeze any extra soup, but use it within a month of freezing.

Exercise – cohesion (commentary)

reference
It (line 03) anaphorically presupposes the garlic (line 02).
The in the mixture points at “the mixture you have made by following the instructions up until this point”, that is, the whole first paragraph plus add the chicken in line 05.
Larger compares “the pan you use if you plan to double the recipe” with the large pan mentioned in the first sentence of line 01.

substitution
One in line 01 substitutes for the head pan. The text continues to discuss the general class pans, but a different subclass, so larger repudiates large.

ellipsis
In line 05 we interpret the instructions as “Stir in the carrots and (stir in) the remaining vegetables” although the verb stir has been omitted before the remaining vegetables.

conjunction
The temporal conjunction then appears in line 03, linking “Pour in the stock…” and “…stir in the potatoes…” in a time sequence. Readers would likely interpret this as a time sequence based on their general knowledge of instructional texts, which typically link items in sequence. However, the author has chosen to make the sequential order clear here. (Temporal conjunctions could have been used in other places, such as before fry in line 02.)

lexical cohesion
Many of the words are collocations. Pan, fry and oil are all related to cooking. Stock, soup and boil are all related to liquids. Carrots and potatoes are subordinates of vegetables.
Spoken language

For much of history, written texts were seen as the most important form of human language while spoken texts were dismissed as relatively unimportant. Partly this had to do with the ephemeral nature of speech. It was hard to analyse things people said without having access to technology that allowed words to be recorded and carefully analysed. This was, in part, related to who could write. When the ability to write was limited to certain members of society, especially those with more economic and social power, it was inevitable that their written words were seen as more prestigious than the spoken words of socially weaker illiterate people. This had to do, in part, with what was written, especially the important religious texts that were painstakingly copied out by hand.

This is no longer the case. Spoken texts can be recorded, transcribed and analysed. Literacy is more common throughout many societies. Spoken language is now recognised as having an important social function, allowing people to develop and maintain social relations. In addition, it is recognised that linguistic innovation comes through spoken language. New words typically appear in speech long before lexicographers decide that they are common enough to be included in dictionaries. If we want to know about language, we can’t dismiss spoken texts as minor, unimportant relations of written texts. At the very least, we have to acknowledge that most of us talk a lot more than we write. A study of university students by Mehl et al. (2007, p. 82) found that “women and men both use on average about 16,000 words per day”. It would be very difficult to produce even an approximation of that number of written words in a day without resorting to writing nonsense or using a lot of repetition.

So far in this chapter I have mostly discussed written texts, so it is important to point out that the features of cohesion apply to spoken texts as much as to written texts. The words that make up political speeches, conversations at a café, lectures and so forth will all be cohesive or we would not recognise them as texts. Some spoken texts are similar to written texts in that they are planned, that is, prepared ahead of time. An important speech will often be written, rewritten and edited before it is delivered orally to an audience. Politicians who regularly deliver speeches are known for making
the same supposedly offhand comments and jokes at the same time on each occasion that they make a speech. Their careful planning includes preparing their words in such a manner that they don’t look completely planned. Television and radio news broadcasts, university lectures and songs are also planned spoken texts.

Other spoken texts are **spontaneous** events for which the participants don’t prepare ahead of time: chance meetings with friends on the street, informal discussions at work and so on. When you make arrangements to meet someone for lunch, you know you will talk, but you might not have any thoughts about what you will talk about or how you will say it. Most of us are so well versed in participating in spontaneous spoken interactions that we don’t think about them at all. It’s only when we are asked to give a speech or make a presentation, both planned speech events, that we start to panic.

The line between planned and spontaneous texts is not clearly defined. Instead of picturing a strict delineation, it is best to imagine a continuum with completely planned texts at one end and completely spontaneous texts at the other. If you arrange to meet someone to tell them some interesting news about yourself, you may have some ideas about what you want to say, but you probably don’t take too much time planning how you will deliver your news. You might call this a mostly spontaneous spoken text. On the other hand, a good lecturer will plan her words to an extent, perhaps using a PowerPoint presentation to show her plan to the audience, but she’ll allow some spontaneity, taking questions and making remarks appropriate to her audience. This would be a mostly planned spoken text.

Written texts can also be described as planned or spontaneous. You spend more time preparing a university essay, job application or email to a co-worker than you do a text message to a friend or a note on the refrigerator reminding a family member to buy milk. We can generally say that spoken texts tend to be more spontaneous than written texts, but there is overlap between the two.

Most of the language education we receive is about planned written texts, although it may not be described as such. Teachers show students how to write sentences and essays, university lecturers explain how to write formal academic papers and career counsellors teach people how to write CVs and cover letters. The nature of spontaneous spoken texts is mostly left unexplained. Parents may give
some explicit instruction on how to talk, reminding their children to say “please” when they make requests, for example, but for the most part we learn how to talk spontaneously without direct explanations.

**Conversation**

If we want to explain how language works, we must be able to discuss all texts, not just those planned written ones that were historically considered most worthy of study. Informal spoken conversations, which are probably the most commonly occurring speech event for the majority of people, can’t be ignored. Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974) wrote what has become a very influential article to explain how we talk spontaneously. Although the title of their paper, *A simplest systematics for the organization of turn-taking for conversation*, is not particularly simple, their purpose is: explain what a conversation is and what rules people follow when they participate in one. Understanding Sacks et al.’s (1974) explanation of *conversation*, much as with Halliday and Hasan’s (1976) explanation of *cohesion*, is fundamental to understanding the ways in which people use language.

To begin, it is important to define precisely what is meant by *conversation*. Sacks et al. (1974, p. 700–701) define it as a spoken interaction between a few speakers in which people mostly talk one at a time. Additionally, neither the topic, the number of turns each person will have, nor the length of each turn is set in advance. In practice, there is no set limit on how many people can be involved in a conversation, but once you pass a small number, typically given as four or five, it becomes difficult for everyone to have a turn, and some management, at least informally, is needed to make sure everyone has the opportunity to speak. Even small, relatively informal business meetings typically have a chair to keep speakers organised. Conversations among friends may sometimes become similarly managed once too many people are involved. The more common occurrence is for the group of friends to divide into two or more smaller groups of a size better suited to conversation: one group in the kitchen, another by the television, and so on. We can see that Sacks et al.’s definition of conversation is quite specific. Some spoken texts are not conversations: a political speech is given by
one person, a lecture’s topic is set in advance, a meeting’s length is often predetermined and so on. However, as conversations feature so prevalently in our daily lives, they are a special type of spoken text that is worthy of special attention in linguistic analyses.

Sacks et al. (1974) have provided us with precise terms to discuss the units of language that make up spontaneous conversations. Planned texts, especially written ones, are divided into sentences, each of which is made up of a subject, a verb and optional additional elements. Conversations may include sentences, but they often don’t. Conversations, instead, are made up of clause-length, phrase-length and word-length turn construction units (TCUs). Unlike in a written text, in which it is expected that we write in sentences, participants in a conversation use shorter units of language. In 1.9 identify which TCUs are clauses, phrases and words.

1.9

01 A: you want the book?
02 B: the older edition?
03 A: yeah
04 B: sure
05 A: good enough?
06 B: thanks

Turn 01 is the only clause TCU here. It features a subject you and a verb want. It is not spoken as a question grammatically, that is, A doesn’t say “Do you want the book?” but we can recognise that it is a question from the inclusion of the question mark signalling rising intonation. (The distinction to be made here is between an interrogative clause, one which shows that it is asking something through grammar (e.g. “Would you like some coffee?”), and a question, which can be made without grammar (e.g. Saying “Coffee?” while holding up a pot.)

Turns 02 and 05 are phrase TCUs. B’s turn 02 is a noun phrase as it has a head noun edition and two modifiers: the and older. There is no verb, so it is not a clause, but we can interpret the phrase by looking at turn 01 and guessing that B is asking “Is it the older edition?” or perhaps “Do you want the older edition?” Speaker A must have arrived at a satisfactory interpretation as the response “yeah” in turn 03 allowed the conversation to progress. A’s turn 05 is also a phrase, likely interpretable as “Is that good enough?” or “Is it good
Turn completion

We can also use 1.9 to think about how we know when speakers have finished their turns: grammar, intonation and action. Turn 01, as discussed, is grammatically complete as a clause because it has a subject you, a verb want and an object the book. A competent English user would hear this and realise that it is a fully formed clause that doesn’t need any more words to be complete.

In addition, turn 01 was spoken with rising intonation, which signals that it is to be taken as a completed question. Rising intonation, when used in yes/no questions, typically begins at the start of the final syllable in the question. Transcribers may indicate this with an arrow rising from left to right (↗) before the last syllable of the question. I could have written “you want the \textit{book}” to make it clearer to readers that this turn was said with rising intonation. This is more accurate than using a question mark as I did in 1.9 because, although we use a question mark for different types of questions in written language, we don’t use
the same intonation for all questions. Yes/no questions are commonly signalled with rising intonation while wh- questions (who, what, where, when, why and how) are not. (Try saying “What day is it?” and “Is it Tuesday?” and notice that while you may rise on the syllable day in Tuesday, you don’t rise anywhere in “What day is it?”).

Finally, we can see that turn 01 was complete as an action, meaning that a receiver would understand why it was said. In this turn, it is simple as it is a question, but other actions could be responses, offers, warnings, statements of information and so on.

When a turn is completed, the speaker has created what Sacks et al. (1974) call a transition-relevance place (TRP), a point at which it is obviously possible for another speaker to begin speaking. Note that this doesn’t mean another speaker must speak, only that a space in the text has been opened where a transition to another speaker might occur.

Look again at turns 02, 03 and 04 of 1.9 while considering how turns which are completed by grammar, intonation and action mark TRPs. (Rising intonation has been indicated with arrows for clarity.)

1.9

01 A: you want the \textcolor{red}{book} (TRP)
02 B: the older \textcolor{red}{edition} (TRP)
03 A: yeah (TRP)
04 B: sure (TRP, no one chooses to speak, conversation ends)

Turn 02 is grammatically a noun phrase. Rising intonation on the turn indicates that it is to be taken as a yes/no question. As an action, it doesn’t answer the question in turn 01, so it will be interpreted as a request for clarification about the question in turn 01. Turn 03 doesn’t feature any grammatical relations between words as it is just one word. However, listeners will realise that there is an elliptical clause here, so turn 02 will be interpreted as something like, “yeah [it is the older edition].” No intonation is indicated in turn 03, yet without it turn 03 is still easily interpretable as an action for it is a response to the question in turn 02. Turn 04, despite also featuring only elliptical grammar (“sure [I want the book]”) and no intonation, is also easily interpretable as an action, in this case a response to turn 01. The question in turn 02 is answered in turn 03, so a listener
will look back to find an earlier turn to make turn 04 relevant as an action.

To clarify something written in the previous paragraph, it should be said that *all* speech features intonation, whether it is rising, falling or level, but transcribers typically only indicate features of intonation that they want to discuss. For most purposes, it would be too laborious to show all intonation contours. If spoken transcriptions don’t show intonation, you should assume that the words were spoken in the most obvious way. In fact, this holds true for many features of conversation: pauses, volume, speed and so on. Transcribers rarely show all of them, choosing instead to focus on those which they think are most relevant to their current purpose.

Conversations take place among multiple speakers, but as conversations are spontaneous, there is no set order of turns that each participant must follow. Speakers instead allocate turns in two ways: **other-selection**, in which the current speaker indicates who should speak next, and **self-selection**, in which someone chooses to speak, despite no indication in the text that he or she should speak next.

Other-selection is often done through the use of a **vocative**, which is a person’s name, title or other means of addressing a specific person. The name *Johnny* in “Johnny, be good” is a vocative as it is being used to talk to Johnny. The name Johnny in “Do you know Johnny?” is not a vocative as it is being used to talk about Johnny, not to him. In 1.10 some examples of other-selection by vocative are presented with the vocatives marked in italics.

1.10
1. What do you think, *Abby*?
2. *Nurse,* please pick up line 02.

In English we typically use commas in written texts or pauses in spoken texts to separate vocatives from the co-text. This marks them as distinct from other uses of the same words when they are being used to denote someone. Consider the difference between “Let’s ask the nurse”, meaning “Let’s ask the person who is a nurse” and
“Nurse, please pick up line 02”, meaning “You who are a nurse, please pick up line 02.”

Other-selection is also done commonly by using the personal reference you, as in “Will you come with me?” In larger groups of people it is common to use gaze or to point with a finger to make it clear which person you refers to exophorically.

Self-selection occurs when cues from grammar, intonation or action make it clear that the current speaker’s turn is finished, but there is no indication in the text about who should speak next. (Note that at the end of a completed turn that has no indication of who should speak next the current speaker may choose to continue speaking.) When someone greets you with “Hello”, you know that to be polite you should reply with a greeting, but you haven’t been specifically chosen to reply. In 1.11, speaker E says “See ya later” to a group of friends. Speaker F then self-selects to respond, followed by simultaneous self-selection by speakers K, J and A. (The square bracket [ indicates that turns 03, 04 and 05 all began at the same time.)

1.11 (Data collected by Kirsten Marsh)

01 E: I’m off. See ya later
02 F: Bye babes
03 K: [Laters
04 J: [See ya tomorrow
05 A: [Bye

Conversations are texts, but they differ from most other text genres as they are spontaneously produced by their participants. Being able to identify TRPs, by understanding the construction of turns, turn completion and speaker selection, allows us to see how speakers work together to build these texts.

**Exercise – turns**

Identify the TCU and TRPs in the following transcription. Explain whether turn-taking happens via self-selection or other-selection. A commentary on some of the features follows.
Two restaurant serving staff, J & K, discuss some of their customers.

01 J: Have you been to table eighteen
02 K: Yeah I took them a jug of tap water
03 J: Anything else
04 K: No

**Exercise – turns (commentary)**

In line 01 J produces a clause-length interrogative TCU. Although it is grammatically a yes/no question, J did not produce it with any rising intonation. This is likely because the grammar of the clause makes it apparent that it is a question, so rising intonation would be possible, but redundant. This turn features other-selection, as you refers to K, thus selecting her to speak next.

Line 02, although one turn, should be analysed as two separate TCUs: the word-length TCU “Yeah” and the clause-length TCU “I took them a jug of tap water.” The first TCU is an action that responds to J’s question in turn 01. (Note that “Yeah” here features clausal ellipsis, as we interpret K’s “Yeah” as “Yeah [I have been to table eighteen].”) There is thus a TRP after “Yeah”, as this turn is possibly complete; a question has been answered. However, K self-selects to continue speaking, producing the clause-length TCU “I took them a jug of tap water.” This is a declarative clause that elaborates on J’s question in line 01.

J’s phrase-length TCU in line 03 again features ellipsis, and is likely to be interpreted as “[Did you take them] anything else”. The rising intonation and the elliptical information help us interpret this as a new action. Although J has not said you in turn 03, we should see this as other-selection, as the elliptical you indicates that K should speak next.

The word-length TCU “No” in line 04 shows us that K has interpreted “Anything else” as an action requiring a response. There is now a TRP after “No” in which either speaker could choose to continue the conversation. If neither one speaks, the conversation ends.
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