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On the Surface of Discourse[1]

Michael Hoey presents a noteworthy thesis that is highly applicable to biblical study and Christian writing. He wrote in the year 1983, when the field of discourse analysis was still in its early childhood.[2] And he felt the need to explain the reason for study in this field. In his own words:

> In writing, sentences bunch into conventional unites called paragraphs, paragraphs into chapters, and chapters into books. In short, in our everyday speech and writing, the sentence is only a small cog in a normally much larger machine. *It is the task of discourse analysis* to find out how that machine works, partly because it is fascinating in itself, and partly because at times particular machines need repairing. It is hoped that the following work will be of interest both to those who want to know more about how discourses are organized and those who want to mend either their own or others' damaged discourses.[3]

Hoey begins with reference to experiments done by a colleague, Eugene Winter, who studied innate, or intuitive understanding of discourse construction. For example, a text of 10 sentences was given to 229 first year college students. The text was given sentence by sentence in a badly jumbled order and the students were to attempt to put it back into its original order in just a short period of time. The majority of students were able to do this. Hoey summarizes the results of follow:

> What these results suggest is that most of the students were capable of a considerable degree of discourse reconstruction. Since none of them had had any tuition in discourse organization – the tests were performed in the first week of attendance at the college – it can be reasonably argued that they must have been applying an instinctive knowledge of discourses or what Dr. Winter has called (1976) a 'consensus' about discourse organization.[4]

Hoey refers to several other experiments with students and various texts and he summarizes as follows:

> What, in short, the native informant's ability to re-paragraph discourse really amounts to is an ability to discern the patterns of organization of discourses. The rest of

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[1] Michael Hoey, *On the Surface of Discourse* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1983).

[2] Ibid., 1-3.

[3] Ibid., 1. Emphasis added.

[4] Ibid., 5.

this book is devoted to explaining how he discerns these patterns and what these patterns are that he discerns.[5]

Relations

Before looking at patterns of organization in discourses, Hoey puts a major emphasis on understanding what he (using Winter) calls "clause relations." He quotes Winter's definition as follows: "A clause relation is the cognitive process whereby we interpret the meaning of a sentence or group of sentences in the light of its adjoining sentence or group of sentences."[6] The name "clause" is unfortunate because Hoey goes to great pains to show that the "relations" he is referring to go way beyond the clause level; it includes sentences, paragraphs and groups of paragraphs. He then drops the term "clause relations" and simply refers to them as "relations." These are something that take place on a semantic level (therefore it is referred to as a "cognitive process") but they are signaled through surface structure signals. He says, "A relation involves the addition of something; when two pieces of language are placed together, if their meaning together is more than the sum total of their separate parts, then they are in relation with each other. If on the other hand no meaning is added when they are placed together, or if no agreement can be reached about the meaning that might have been added, then they are not in a relation with each other."[7]

Hoey talks briefly about the types or categories of clause relations but this does not seem to be a major interest of his.[8] He quickly moves on to the surface structure signaling devices which mark clause relations.

Types of signals

A large number of clause relations in a discourse are signaled through what Hoey refers to as "subordinators" and "conjuncts." The use of these broader linguistic terms (rather than something like "participles" and "conjunctions") is proper, because the presence of "relations" is not language specific, while the schema of signalers *is* language specific. When one clause or sentence or paragraph is signaled as being subordinated (and dependant) on another one, this is a clear signal that there is a relation involved between the two. Conjunctions and particles are often used to signal *what* the relation might be (parallel, contrasting, expansion, retraction, etc).

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[5] Ibid., 15.

[6] Ibid., 18.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid., 19-21.

Another type of signaling is "lexical signaling." Each language has a repertoire of actual words that function as context-specific signals. Hoey says, "It will be seen throughout this book that lexical signals are common and their recognition essential to successful discourse analysis."[9] These signals offer helpful interpretive clues. Hoey says, "Lexical signals may spell out a relation before, during, or after the event."[10]

The other signaling device that Hoey deals with is repetition. He refers to Winter again and says, "Winter has in fact demonstrated that many relations are signaled by repetition. He notes that sentences are unable to carry all the information that might be given on a subject; they are by their nature selective. Repetition is accordingly a way of 'opening out' a sentence so that its lexical uniqueness may be used as the basis for providing further, related information."[11]

Hoey rounds off the discussion of clause relations by describing two ways of uncovering or clarifying the relations. This is done through paraphrase and asking questions.[12]

Patterns of Discourse Organization

From there, Hoey demonstrates all the previous assertions by examining one particular pattern of discourse structure: The Problem – Solution Pattern. He devotes chapters 3 through 5 to this.[13] This is an effective way to discuss the "nuts and bolts" of recognizing relations and through this recognition, uncovering the discourse structure. Hoey says, "The emphasis is placed on the ways in which the surface of the discourse (not necessarily to be contrasted with hidden depths) contains sufficient clues for the reader/listener to perceive accurately the discourse's organization."[14]

The Problem—Solution pattern is very common in literature and Hoey shows how the pattern is often extended, embedded or layered, and concluded. But Hoey wants to make clear that this pattern is not comprehensive of all literature. He says,

> In the last three chapters we have concentrated almost all of our attention on discourses organized on the Problem – Solution pattern. Although the Problem – solution pattern is of considerable importance in discourse analysis and, as we have seen, is a popular form for a wide range of types of written discourse, it does not apply to all discourses equally well nor does it account for all the material in those discourses to

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[9] Ibid., 23.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid., 25.

[12] Ibid., 26-30.

[13] Ibid., 31-106.

[14] Ibid., 33.

which it does apply. In this and the next chapter we shall examine several other important types of pattern that can be used to organize discourses and we will show how these explain the existence of some discourses and we will show how these explain the existence of discourses and flesh out our understanding of others.

The other patterns of discourse the Hoey deals with are 1, Matching Patterns and 2, General – Particular Patterns. These, along with the Problem – Solution pattern can be combined, mixed, and imbedded within a single discourse. They can be broken down further into specific categories. And Hoey gives criteria for discerning the patterns and documenting them using tree structures.

In summary, Hoey has done an excellent job of describing and demonstrating the phenomena involved in communication structure. He has laid a foundational groundwork for further study in the area of discourse analysis.

Theoretical Conclusions

Hoey winds up his discussion with a chapter of summary and restatement of his major assertions.[15] He says, "In this chapter we try to show the theoretical framework that appears to underpin the work discussed in previous chapters. No certainties are offered, only clues as to how the facts of discourse all fit together *vis-à-vis* spoken and written monologues."[16]

He states that discourses should be recognized as "relation networks" rather than being strictly or primarily hierarchical.[17] He states, "Any sentence (or part of a sentence or group of sentences) may be in a relation with any other sentence (or part of a sentence or group of sentences) within the same discourse."[18] This has important application for the field of Biblical Study, where the hierarchical model is often assumed and paragraphs and sections are bracketed off as separate units.[19]

Hoey deals with what he calls "The Readers Approach to Discourse." He says:

A simplified representation of what happens in written discourse is as follows. The writer initiates his discourse with a first sentence. The form and content of this first sentence are undoubtedly affected in only partly understood ways by a number of cultural

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[15] Ibid., 168-188.

[16] Ibid., 168.

[17] "Essentially we should want to say that all discourses must, willy-nilly, be describable in terms of the total set of relations that exist within them – such a network is the discourse organization." Ibid., 179.

[18] Ibid., 169.

[19] For example, Romans chapters 1-8 is bracketed off from Romans 9-11 which is again bracketed off from Romans 12-16.

expectations established for the medium in which the writing appears and aroused by the title. Nevertheless constraints are relatively absent for this first sentence and a reader's expectations of it are not particularly precise. The reader scans the first sentence and forms expectations as to the information that might follow. No harm is done by representing these expectations as questions. The writer then offers a further sentence which is scanned by the reader as a possible answer to one or more of his or her questions (or expectations). If something in the sentence signals that the question being answered is not one on the reader's short list, then the reader retrospectively has to re-crate the question that it must be answering, and if this is in turn impossible, the reader assumes that the sentences are in fact unrelated and seeks a relation elsewhere in the discourse.[20]

This explains the need for signaling words, phrases, clauses, sentences etc. They are the writer's way of keeping the reader (to use a common expression) "on the same page." Hoey says, "When a relation is signaled, a message is being communicated about the way in which the discourse should be interpreted: the writer/speaker is telling his or her reader/auditor to interpret the juxtaposition of the parts of his or her discourse in a particular way."[21]

Hoey gives a few pages for treatment on the subject of "Rhetorical Ineptness."[22] This is when the network of relations has too much interference or a breakdown somewhere along the way. Hoey says, "Rhetorical ineptness may arise either from under-signaling so that no clear focus of attention is found or mis-signaling so that the reader is wrongly directed as to what to expect."[23] This is a failure on the part of the writer/speaker "to give readers/hearers a clear path through a discourse."[24] The onus is on the author to make his message clear, the relations discernible, and the structure recognizable to the reader.

Conclusion

Micheal Hoey concludes his written work with these self-effacing words:

It seemed best to present a truthful picture of what has so far been discovered about monologues without making claims to completeness. We are acutely conscious of what a paltry beginning this book is, compared with the work that is still to be done. Our only consolation is that this book is a shanty-town built upon rock rather than a palace built

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[20] Ibid., 170-171.

[21] Ibid., 178.

[22] Ibid., 179-183.

[23] Ibid., 180.

[24] Ibid., 187.

upon sand. As such it awaits redevelopment with the confidence that what it offers is worth redeveloping.[25]

The truth is, Hoey has done an excellent job of taking some very abstract concepts and fleshing them out for students of linguistics and written communication. He has laid the theoretical groundwork for analyzing discourses of any size and shape. He develops his thesis step by step through eight progressive chapters. Throughout each chapter he shows himself to be rhetorically adept. His organization is clear. He gives helpful previews, restatements, and concludes each chapter with comprehensive bulleted summary points. He therefore presents his message equally well by word *and* example.

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[25] Ibid., 187-188.