

## **A MODEL OF A DISCOURSE GRAMMAR FOR THE ANALYSIS OF THAI**

Peansiri E. Vongvipanond  
Chulalongkorn University  
Bangkok, Thailand

### **1. INTRODUCTION.**

It is obvious that discourse is as natural a linguistic unit as sentence, phrase, or words. However, discourse had not been the focus of linguistic study until the 1960's, when Pike (1964) and Gleason (1968) proposed their work in discourse analysis. Discourse is defined as an extension of sentence, a construction at a higher level than a sentence in the structural hierarchy of linguistic units. It is clear to those working with discourse that though there are discernible patterns of regularity, these are not readily reducible into explicit rules by which speakers of the language have to abide as they construct their oral or written discourse. As a consequence, most linguists working on discourse, such as Dijk (1972 and 1973), Grimes (1975), Halliday and Hasan (1976), Longacre (1983), and Werth (1984) have come to content themselves with the definition of discourse as a semantic unit with a semantic structure, which is overtly manifested as a cohesive composite of sentences. It is not surprising then that a great deal of attention has been focused on the unifying relations of sentences which make up a discourse, variously referred to as cohesion, coherence or connectivity. However, attempts have been continuously made to formulate a discourse grammar or a text grammar, which is categorically different from a sentence grammar. This paper is another attempt in this direction. The model of discourse grammar to be outlined here has evolved from a practical framework for a systematic analysis and an evaluation of expository discourses in Thai. The grammar, however, is not exclusive to any particular types of discourse.

Two terms, "discourse" and "text", have been used by different groups of linguists working with linguistic units larger than sentences, who happen to be in geographically as well as culturally different regions of the world. "Discourse" is used by American linguists such as Pike (1964), Gleason (1968), Grimes (1975) and Longacre (1983), whose work concentrates on

oral narratives in lesser known languages without a writing tradition. The term is also used by British language educators, such as in Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) and Coulthard (1977), who focus on the analysis of oral discourses in classroom. The term "text" is used by European linguists, who do not usually recognize the distinction between grammar and language performance and prefer to look at language in social context. Halliday (1967 and 1968), van Dijk (1972 and 1973) and de Beaugrande (1985) are among this group. Their text grammars usually account for both the text and the context in which the text itself is situated. The author shares the same assumption about linguistic study as that of the European text linguists; however, the term "discourse" will be used in this paper, since it implies the communicative aspect rather than the physical aspect of this linguistic unit.

## 2. FILTERS AND CHOICES IN GRAMMAR

Since the proposal of the generative theory of language by Chomsky (1957,1965), grammar has come to be defined for many linguists as an enumeration of sets of rules which make explicit the linguistic competence of an "ideal speaker-hearer", which enables him to determine the grammaticality of an utterance. An utterance is taken to be equivalent to a sentence. The rules proposed in the grammar serve as "filters" to block ungrammatical sentences from being generated. This type of filter grammar cannot be easily adopted for discourse for two reasons. First, a discourse is not an absolute, autonomous syntactic construction like a sentence. It is possible to prescribe constituency of a sentence as consisting, at a minimum, of a subject noun phrase and a verb phrase which predicates it. It is also possible to determine the beginning and the ending of a sentence though theoretically a sentence can be of a definite length. This certainly is not the case with a discourse. Secondly, grammaticality and ungrammaticality are not attributes of a discourse. A discourse, spoken or written, can be well composed or badly composed. The judgement is usually subjective and it is not the concern of ordinary native speakers. They can manage to obtain the meaning of even a discourse which is considered badly composed. Only professional groups such as teachers, editors and psychiatrists concern themselves with quality of discourse. As a consequence, it is not possible to write a grammar of filters for discourse. Instead, one finds grammars of frequency of occurrence like those proposed by Grimes (1975) and Longacre (1983) or cognitive grammars of

text production and comprehension like those proposed by de Beaugrande and Dressler (1981) and van Dijk and Kintsch (1983) or a functional grammar like the one proposed by Halliday (1967 and 1968), which describes the various structures in language as manifestations of systems of meaning postulates, the choice of which is made by speakers.

The theoretical framework which underlies a discourse grammar proposed in this paper is the same as Halliday's systemic grammar. As summed up in Halliday (1976), a grammar is a network of systems bridging the meaning, which is determined by the choices made within the systems, and the syntactic and phonological manifestation of the meaning. Three systems have been proposed by Halliday: the Mood and Modulation System, the Transitivity System and the Thematization System which respectively represent three major socio-cultural functions: the Interpersonal Function, the Ideational Function and the Textual Function.

The difference between Halliday's systemic grammar and the grammar to be proposed in this paper lies in the focus and the scope of the grammars. Though Halliday recognizes the effect of textuality on sentence structure and accounts for it as the thematization system and he co-authors with Ruqaiya Hasan (1976) an extensive analysis of cohesive devices in English, his grammar is sentence-oriented. He comprehensively illustrates the surface manifestation of the network of these three systems in his admirable description of the English language (Kress 1976: 101-233).

The model of grammar to be proposed in this paper is a discourse grammar, which is part of an entire language system, consisting of a discourse grammar and a clause grammar. Discourse grammar accounts for the choices to be made in the organization of information to be communicated in a unified linear sequence known as discourse. Clauses are constituents of discourse. The organization of information at the clausal level is different from that at the discourse level (Ekniyos 1982) and clause manifestations are subject to syntactic, morphological and phonological constraints or filters.

The grammar is formulated on the basis of an analysis of a discourse corpus, which originally consisted of 26 academic papers in humanities. Ten papers, five in social science and five in science and technology were later added. The grammar was also used as a framework for an evaluative analysis of two sets of compositions by senior high school students. One set consists of 22 compositions on "Teenagers and Love". The other consists of 22 compositions on

"Biology".

### 3. INFORMATION STRUCTURING

The concept of information structuring which underlies this model of grammar is an adaptation of the the Prague School linguists' notion of Functional Sentence Perspective or FSP (Mathesius 1961, Firbas 1964), which can be defined as the structuring of information within a clause. The concept has been used by the author (Ekniyom 1982) in a study of how the structuring of information determines the surface structure of sentences in Thai. Implicit in the FSP and information structuring concepts is the fact that information is communicated orally or in writing in a linear sequence due to the physical condition of human speech production and perception mechanism. Speech and writing are both linear sequencing of information. A sentence, or rather a clause, is a representation of an information unit. In each unit, there are a number of blocks of information, represented by words and morphemes, or groups of words and morphemes, in the language. To facilitate comprehension, information within a clause is assigned different information functions. Information which serves as "point of departure" has the function of being the topic of the sentence. Information which is being imparted about the topic has the function of being the comment of the sentence. In Thai, these information functions determine the sequential positioning of sentence constituents. There are also morphological devices for marking emphatic topic and comment.

The author has extended the same principle of information structuring for the analysis of discourse. Discourse is defined as a linear sequence of a set of semantically related information units. It is conceivable to have a discourse which contains only one information unit, and thus only one single independent clause. However, this one-clause discourse is most likely part of a larger discourse. An example is the ritual discourse at a wedding. A bride and a groom may deliver only one line, "Yes, I do" as a response to the long description of marital responsibilities cited by the officiating clergyman. Their one-line discourse is actually embedded in the entire discourse prescribed for the occasion.

Therefore it is not inconceivable to claim that people usually talk or write in discourse and not sentence. With a thought or a developing succession of thoughts in his mind, a person is forced to structure the information he wishes to convey in such a way that