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# In the Eye of the Beholder: The Coherence of Nonstandard Discourse

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## Abstract

Researchers investigating discourse coherence typically examine the various mechanisms that bring about coherence. This body of research has acknowledged that the specific coherence relations which unite the individual discourse units work as a result of an assumption about the coherence of discourse in general. The standard approach to coherence investigation has been to analyze conventional texts and conversations in which both coherence relations and the assumption of coherence are present. By limiting themselves to the analysis of standard discourse, researchers have ignored nonstandard sources, which can provide insight into the necessity and sufficiency of these mechanisms. This paper provides several examples of nonstandard discourse. From these examples, we conclude that an assumption of coherence is the only necessary and sufficient mechanism required for judgments of coherence.

Although coherence is crucial for the perception of well-formed discourse (Dahlgren 1988, 1989; Green 1989; Hobbs 1978, 1979, 1985; Kintsch & van Dijk 1978; Mann & Thompson 1986), definitions of coherence are often circular. If coherence is defined as text which “hangs together,” no real insight is gained. Definitions which merely replace the idea of coherence with other imprecise terms like “unified” or “related” are not useful.

Coherence researchers usually begin with discourse which is intuitively coherent and then describe the mechanisms that are present (e.g., Dahlgren 1988, 1989; Hobbs 1978, 1979, 1985; Mann & Thompson 1986). In other words, whenever discourse strikes one as coherent, coherence mechanisms are assumed to be present and derivable. Because noncoherent discourse should not contain these mechanisms, it has been dismissed as only the logical opposite of coherent discourse. As a result, it has been ignored by coherence researchers.

The intuitively coherent discourse used in coherence

analysis is usually taken from conversations involving adult speakers (Craig & Tracy 1983), or from well-known publications such as *The Wall Street Journal* (e.g., Dahlgren 1988, 1989). From such analyses, researchers have established a variety of coherence mechanisms. For our purposes, these mechanisms can be divided into two general categories: structural relations, and the assumption of coherence.

## Coherence Mechanisms

*Structural relations* refer to the ways in which words, phrases, sentences, and larger units keep the discourse unified and connected. These are relations which speakers and writers build into their discourse so that readers and listeners can unite potentially disjointed segments into a coherent whole. Structural relations may be explicitly marked in the syntax, or inferred. Examples of *explicit* relations include argument overlap (Kintsch & van Dijk 1978), and some of the “lexicogrammatical” devices of Halliday and Hasan (1976). Relations which *implicitly* connect discourse occur when inferences are made about the presented information. In general, these implicit relations require participants to make inferences based on world knowledge. For example, participants make inferences based on an understanding of causality or logical reasoning. Because structural relations must be recognized as such in order for a discourse to be judged coherent, there are probably only a finite number of them (see Dahlgren 1989; Hobbs 1978, 1979, 1985; Mann & Thompson 1986).

The *assumption of coherence* is part of a participant’s general understanding about the way discourse is supposed to work—even when discourse execution is technically flawed. The assumption of coherence is maintained through the common desire of the discourse participants (see Grice 1975; Daly, Weber, Vangelisti, Maxwell, & Neel 1989; Mann & Thompson 1986). By assuming that a discourse is intended to be coherent,

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participants work to unite potentially disjointed pieces of it (see de Beaugrande 1987). Moreover, participants actively work to achieve coherence for all presented information. Vuchinich (1977), for example, reported increased response latencies after unrelated information was presented during conversations. Presumably, response time increased because the respondent needed more time to try and incorporate the irrelevant utterances into the ongoing conversation.

Because the structural relations and the assumption of coherence normally work together in coherent discourse, researchers usually do not consider separating them. As a result, it is difficult to assess the relative importance of these two mechanisms. Intuitive judgments of coherence may not necessarily be tied to both kinds of mechanisms.

There are actually *four* possible combinations between intuitive judgments of coherence and the presence or absence of coherence mechanisms. The two most obvious combinations were previously mentioned: (1) coherence mechanisms are present in the discourse and the discourse is judged as coherent; and (2) no coherence mechanisms are present in the discourse and the discourse is judged as noncoherent. In addition, there are two other possible combinations which have generally been overlooked. Specifically, it is possible that (3) a discourse is judged as coherent even though no coherence mechanisms are present; and (4) a discourse is judged as noncoherent when there are coherence mechanisms present.

It is the examination of the latter two combinations which also should be of interest to investigators of coherence. This paper will demonstrate the utility of examining discourse coherence by using discourse which could be judged as either coherent or noncoherent. In general, discourse which contains various coherence mechanisms, but which is still considered noncoherent, should establish the insufficiency of these mechanisms. Similarly, discourse that lacks various coherence mechanisms, but which is considered coherent, can be used to establish the non-necessity of these mechanisms.

### Coherence and Nonstandard Discourse

Discourse which may or may not be judged as coherent is found in nonstandard sources. The ambiguity of coherence judgments arises because the coherence of nonstandard passages may only exist for a limited number of readers or speakers. Therefore, nonstandard discourse is not generally studied in discourse processing, artificial intelligence, or computational linguistics. Passages in which coherence is less well defined could serve as

powerful tests of the necessity and sufficiency of the two coherence mechanisms.

Nonstandard discourses which are generally not studied for discourse coherence include poetry, discourse from linguistically deviant populations (e.g., schizophrenics and aphasics), and literary texts from purposefully nonstandard authors (e.g., the experimental writing of James Joyce, Gertrude Stein, or Eugene Ionesco).

The following excerpt from "Tender Buttons" by Gertrude Stein is an example of a nonstandard discourse that some readers would consider coherent and others would not (cited in DeKoven 1983, p. 80):

A cushion has that cover. Supposing you do not like to change, supposing it is very clean that there is no change in appearance, supposing that there is regularity and a costume is that any of the worse than an oyster and an exchange. Come to season that is there any extreme use in feather and cotton. Is there not much more joy in a table and more chairs and very likely roundness and a place to put them.

If this discourse is coherent, it is not immediately obvious. Such nonstandard examples should be useful in determining how judgments of coherence are made. Comparing the presence or absence of coherence mechanisms in nonstandard examples provides a more complete understanding of coherence in standard examples.

The following table shows the relation between the presence or absence of coherence mechanisms and types of discourse. For nonstandard discourse, one mechanism is present while the other is absent.

		Assumption of Coherence	
		Present	Absent
Structural Relations	Present	Standard texts and conversations	Schizophrenic discourse
	Absent	Experimental writing (Stein) Theater of the absurd (Ionesco) Nonstandard poetry (cummings)	Gibberish

### Schizophrenic Speech

The psychotic disorder known as schizophrenia is characterized by noncoherent speech (American Psychiatric Association 1987). This is true even though schizophrenics can produce discourse which uses explicit and implicit structural coherence relations. Therefore, these structural coherence relations must be *insufficient* for the realization of coherence.

There is no overall coherence in the following letter, written by a schizophrenic patient. However, explicit structural relations are present, and appropriate inferences can be drawn (Bleuler 1950, p. 17):

I am writing on paper. The pen which I am using is from a factory called 'Perry & Co.' This factory is in England. I assume this. Behind the name of Perry Co. the city of London is inscribed; but not the city. The city of London is in England. I know this from my school days. Then, I always liked geography. My last teacher in the subject was August A. He was a man with black eyes. I also like black eyes. There are also blue and grey eyes and other sorts, too. I have heard it said that snakes have green eyes. All people have eyes. There are some, too, who are blind. These blind people are led about by a boy. It must be very terrible not to be able to see. There are people who can't see, and in addition, can't hear. I know some who hear too much. One can hear too much. There are many sick people in Burgholzli (sic); they are called patients.

In this example, arguments found in each sentence are linked to arguments found in following sentences. For example, the word "eyes" appears in five consecutive sentences. Although the reader may be able to understand the meaning of the individual sentences, there does not appear to be any overall unity or global coherence. As Hobbs (1982) has pointed out, "coherence isn't mere comprehensibility" (p. 225).

These explicit relations may actually contribute to the incoherence of the passage: The writer spells out inferences which should be obvious (e.g., sick people are called patients). The reader also must make inferences, based on world knowledge, that are *not* explicitly stated. For example, the reader must infer that geography is a subject taught in school. This letter is a good example of how explicit and implicit coherence relations alone are insufficient to establish coherence.

Structural relations are also *unnecessary* for judgments of coherence to be made. The ability of participants to generate inferences demonstrates that explicit coherence relations can be eliminated without

losing coherence. These inferences, however, are also unnecessary for coherence. This conclusion can be supported by looking at another type of nonstandard discourse, in this case from the theater of the absurd.

### Theater of the Absurd

According to Altenbernd and Lewis (1969), the theater of the absurd is based in nihilism: Language is "employed illogically—fragmented, made into mechanical nonsense, kept *non sequitur*, kept banal and worn out. Once the sense of association and congruity necessary to keep language communicative has been removed, the attempt at communication itself becomes an absurdity" (p. 517).

Consider the following example taken from Ionesco's play *The Chairs* (in Altenbernd & Lewis 1969, p. 519):

- |            |   |
|------------|---|
| Old Woman: | Come on now, imitate the month of February.   |
| Old Man:   | I don't like the months of the year.  |
| Old Woman: | Those are the only ones we have, up till now. Come on, just to please me. . .               |
| Old Man:   | All right, here's the month of February. ( <i>He scratches his head like Stan Laurel.</i> ) |

In this example, explicit coherence relations are present since the arguments in each line of the dialog overlap. However, new inferences about the months of the year (e.g., February looks like Stan Laurel scratching his head) must be made: The usual inferences (e.g., February is a cold month) no longer apply. The plays of the theater of the absurd use the audience's expectations of reality in order to violate them.

Such plays are understood coherently because the audience maintains the general communicative assumption of coherence. Theater of the absurd is an example of how normal inferencing mechanisms can be rejected without a loss of coherence, as long as the audience believes that the discourse is intended coherently.

### Nonstandard Poetry

**The poetry of e e cummings.** It is possible for a discourse to be considered coherent when both the explicit *and* implicit structural relations are missing or disordered. Such is the case in some forms of poetry. For example, the e e cummings poem "a like a" is nonstandard both

linguistically and typographically (in Fairley 1980, p. 243):

a like a  
grey  
rock wanderin  
  
g  
through  
pasture  
wom  
  
an creature whom  
than  
earth hers  
  
elf  
could  
silent more no  
be

Because normal word order is not used, the syntax and semantics on which coherence relations are based cannot account for the coherence of the poem. It can be argued, however, that the poem describes an image very effectively. A standard rendering of the poetic image would be much different, and arguably less powerful: "A woman creature is like a grey rock, she (or it) is wandering through pasture. . . earth herself could not be more silent than her" (Fairley 1980, p. 244).

The coherence of this poem results from the abandonment of standard, prescribed, coherence relations. Fairley (1980) points out that it is precisely the deviations from normal structure which make the poem coherent. Although words which explicitly signal structural relations are present (e.g., "whom" is a referent for "wom an creature"), the poem would remain disjointed and fragmented unless the reader worked to relate the pieces into a unified representation.

The following stanza from another cummings poem succinctly sums up this argument (cummings 1968, p. 290):

since feeling is first  
who pays any attention  
to the syntax of things  
will never wholly kiss you;

In much of cummings' poetry, syntax and semantics are used bizarrely. The reader cannot resort to the conventional mechanics of language, and cummings encourages us not to try.

**The poetry of André Breton.** Another example of nonstandard poetry may be found in the surreal writings

of André Breton (cited in Scholes, Comley, & Ulmer 1988, p. 66):

. . . there go the fuses blown again  
Here's the squid with his elbows on the window sill  
And wondering where to unfold his sparkling sewer  
grill  
Is the clown of the eclipse in his white outfit  
Eyes in his pocket. . .

Unlike cummings' poem, which is an unconventional rendering of an image, Breton presents a conventional rendering of a "non-image." If the passage is intended metaphorically, then the reader must actively work to decode it. The reader is willing to make this effort because he or she believes that there is a coherent message to be derived.

### Nonstandard Discourse and Mental Models

These examples demonstrate that readers of nonstandard plays and poetry are able to construct coherent representations without recourse to conventional structural relations. According to Johnson-Laird (1983), the coherence of a discourse is ultimately dependent upon the construction of a mental model or representation for that discourse. In other words, coherent discourse is different from a random collection of sentences because a mental model is constructed.

The establishment of a mental model should not imply that only one mental model is available for each coherent discourse. Discourses simultaneously may be represented by competing mental models, and each one may be coherent or not coherent in varying degrees. For example, the novel *Gulliver's Travels* by Swift (1726/1967) could be simultaneously represented as a series of fantastic adventures or as a critique of English society. The construction of a mental model of the story at one level does not preclude a coherent representation of the story at another level. Readers who do not recognize the satire can nonetheless construct a coherent mental model of the story.

A definition of coherence based upon a mental model does not require explicit structural relations, implicit structural relations, or knowledge about the world. The essential requirement for coherence is the willingness of participants to construct such a model. Nonstandard discourse, such as poetry, is a good example of how mental models can be built without any structural coherence relations. In addition, the language of schizophrenics demonstrates that these relations alone do not guarantee coherence.

## Conclusions

Normally, the structural relations and the assumption of coherence work in tandem to make coherence obvious and robust. Writers and speakers try to build coherence into their texts and utterances by using various structural coherence relations. Indeed, some writers and speakers may be better communicators because they are better at signalling how their message coheres (see Britton 1990). Similarly, some readers and listeners may be better comprehenders because they are better at deciphering these explicit and implicit devices.

Although structural coherence relations would not be interpretable without the assumption of coherence, it is not easy to continue assuming coherence when linguistic structure seemingly belies it. Furthermore, with the exception of schizophrenic speech, it is difficult to imagine a discourse in which the structural coherence relations are present, and yet the discourse is not considered coherent. This must be the case, however, if the assumption of coherence is abandoned. Even the most compelling arguments would be unrecognizable.

The popular arts have used the reliance upon the assumption of coherence for humorous effect. In the movie *Big* and the novel *Being There* (Kosinski 1970) the main characters are not linguistically competent adults: They are "children" thrust into an adult world, in which their linguistic competence is assumed. Consequently, their bizarre linguistic productions are not perceived as such: Their listeners put in the necessary work to make these productions coherent. As a result, their discourse is considered remarkably insightful, when in fact the insight comes from the listener, and not from the child-like speaker.

By assuming that other participants are trying to be coherent, participants work to make the discourse coherent for themselves. Coherence structures facilitate this process for participants; however, the failure to use coherence structures does not mean that coherence fails. Examples from nonstandard discourse have demonstrated that these structures are neither necessary nor sufficient for coherence. The only necessary component a discourse requires to be judged as coherent is the prior assumption that it *will be* coherent. Therefore, the assumption of coherence alone is sufficient to establish coherence.

It has been shown that the necessity and sufficiency of coherence mechanisms can be understood through the investigation of nonstandard discourse. Typically, researchers who study language examine linguistic samples which are selected for their normalcy. Investigations of coherence which are limited to ordinary discourse are unnecessarily restrictive. Because coherence is in the eye of the beholder, participants will

manage to make even the most bizarre linguistic productions cohere.

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