Reflections on discourse and knowledge

An interview with Teun van Dijk*

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József Andor: Thank you very much for accepting my call for an interview. I would like to start it by asking the “father” of modern text linguistics, author of the first, now classic, theoretically oriented monograph, about the current state of the art. At the time when Mouton in The Hague published your Some Aspects of Text Grammars, and in the periods immediately following it, text linguistics mainly concentrated on providing a grammar-like description, interpretation of texts, just slightly extending the scope of analysis beyond the frames of the sentence. This was probably due to the intent to provide a new level of linguistic representation, one that was higher in its scope than that of syntax in linguistic theory. Text linguistics as formulated in the 80s of the last century, this way, was basically a part of the systemic description of language. It may be stated, in view of the later developments of the field, that the early period of modern text linguistics concentrated on outlining frameworks to describe what now can be called the connexity, that is, the primarily grammatically related body of knowledge of texts, or at best what at the time was called ‘locally based cohesion’. There were a number of models developed with this scope, but perhaps yours and that of Halliday and Hasan were the most influential ones. As a matter of fact, the early models were at the time unable to grasp the textual norms of coherence, the role of world knowledge and what has been called ‘common ground’ by Herbert Clark. How do you see, interpret the process of the development of the discipline from the early stages, from purely and strictly linguistically based descriptions of texts to the present day models of textology,

* This interview was recorded in Barcelona, at Pompeu Fabra University, on 8 November 2011. In preparing the tapescript I purposely left the character of the discourse intact, this way preserving the textual features, genre-specific, argumentative style used by my interviewee in its original form, aiming to provide readers with the experience and enjoyment of the continuous flow of Teun van Dijk’s discourse.
with its multidimensional, multimodal scope? What does the present state of the art look like, in your view?

Teun van Dijk: These are a lot of questions. I hope I will remember them all. First of all, I would like to remind you that I don’t think I am the father of text linguistics; I am among the parents, maybe, of text linguistics.

J.A.: You are absolutely modest about it.

T.vD.: No, no, mothers and fathers, if I think of János Petőfi of the Konstanz Group, we were together doing work on the extension of traditional sentence grammars. It is true that in my dissertation of 1972, Some Aspects of Text Grammars, I probably published the first monograph in English about this, but there was the 1971 book on text grammar by Petőfi, Transformationsgrammatiken und eine ko-textuelle Texttheorie, very different from mine, but in fact, also another formal attempt to talk about text grammars. Another thing I would like to emphasize is that from the start I was more interested in coherence and in cohesion. So, for example, while Halliday & Hasan in their book Cohesion in English in the 70s (1976), as they always have done also since then, focus on grammar and on expressions of grammar clauses, and properties of clauses, pronouns, and other cohesive devices, and in this way, in my view, reduced the importance of discourse to surface structure phenomena, I always was more interested in the semantics of discourse, and therefore in coherence, a notion which they don’t use and actually never came to grasp, because they didn’t have a proper semantics, and even later, when in psychology also the notion of cognition and cognitive-based ideas of coherence, for example, in terms of mental models have been developed, they simply were not interested because they are not working in cognition. And in the second chapter of my last book on Discourse in Context (2008) I explain in detail why systemic grammar actually missed many aspects, like systematic semantics, pragmatics, like cognition, many other developments of the last 40 years. So the basic differences between the work other people, including myself, have done on the coherence of discourse in terms of semantic relationship between propositions on one end, and the work being done on the surface manifestations of coherence in Cohesion in English and other books, which actually are neither necessary, nor sufficient, because you can have coherence without these cohesive devices, and you can have cohesive devices which do not guarantee coherence at all. So it is important that these be described, but only together with the underlying semantics of coherence. So that is important to start, to have some idea about the 70s, and how my book Text and Context (1977), and not only my disserta-