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The Geneva Model of discourse analysis: an interactionist and modular approach to discourse organization

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ABSTRACT This article presents recent developments in the Geneva modular and interactionist approach to discourse organization. The first section analyses the main epistemological, theoretical and methodological properties of the Geneva Model by examining its relationship to data, communicative action, complexity and discourse organization, and then outlines the Geneva Model's modular methodology. The second section of the article focuses on a text extract from a service encounter and applies some aspects of the modular methodology to the analysis of request sequences. The authors argue that requests cannot be reduced to the utterance of single speech acts but are best described as complex discourse practices linking praxeological information, conceptual knowledge and textual competence.

KEY WORDS: *action, complexity, conceptual knowledge, dialogue structure, discourse analysis, interaction, modularity, requests, service encounters*

Introduction

The 'Geneva Model of discourse analysis' comprises a set of hypotheses developed in the 1980s regarding the hierarchical and functional organization of discourse structures. In the work of Roulet et al. (1985) and various articles published in the *Cahiers de linguistique française* since 1980, linguists working at the University of Geneva proposed a systematic account of the *structure* of both monological and dialogical discourse. More specifically, they showed that the construction of any verbal interaction or written text reflects a process of *negotiation* in which speakers recursively initiate, react on, or ratify propositions by means of semiotic constituents belonging to various hierarchical levels: *exchanges*, *moves* and *acts* (see 2.2.3). The major interest of the work carried out at that time was to combine classical pragmatic categories such as speech acts with both a unified theory of the structure of human behavior (Pike, 1967) and an inquiry into discourse relations and discourse markers (Ducrot et al., 1980). Moreover, Roulet et al. helped to explain the complexity, variety and infinity of

discourse realities by means of a restricted set of basic and recursive principles. In this sense, their work has sometimes been considered an interesting alternative to the turn-taking system developed in the field of conversational analysis (Sacks et al., 1978).

Over the last two decades, this hierarchical and functional model of discourse structure has been fruitfully applied to the description of various discursive *genres*. It has also been developed in different languages such as Chinese (Auchlin, 1993), Wobe (Egner, 1988), Portuguese (Pires, 1997), German (Wetzel-Kranz, 1997), Spanish (Miche, 1998), Catalan (Espuny, 1997) and English (Mell, 1992; Roulet, 1997a) and has inspired significant insights into many contemporary issues in discourse analysis: teaching (Germain, 1997); human–machine interaction (Luzzati, 1995); the functioning of argumentation in everyday interaction (Martel, 1998); and the foundation of an interlocutionary logic (Ghiglione and Trognon, 1993), to name a few.

However, when applied to recent work in the field of discourse analysis (Bronckart, 1997; Scollon, 2001; Van Dijk, 1997a, 1997b), a hierarchical model of discourse structure encountered serious theoretical difficulties, which prevented its extension into a global method for analysing discourse. Apart from technical arguments proposed by Vion (1992: 170) and Kerbrat-Orecchioni (1990: 243), the initial Geneva Model soon appeared too reductive to account for the variety of factors interwoven in the organization of language use. For instance, the Geneva Model focused exclusively on questions of discourse structures and internal relations between linguistic segments, whilst ignoring issues such as text type, topic organization, mental representations or social stakes, which obviously play a crucial role in the construction of discursive realities. More important, the Geneva Model largely neglected both *social* and *cognitive* factors in the description of texts or talk, and failed to conceive discourse as a constitutive part of local and global social contexts.

Recent research carried out in Geneva had the specific aim of overcoming these theoretical limitations and considering language use not just as a structured set of hierarchically organized propositions, but also as a complex semiotic reality, deeply interrelated to social actions and mental representations. In order to enrich the description of hierarchical structures, a wide range of discursive processes has been taken into consideration and articulated in an integrated methodology. What emerged from this reorientation was a considerably revised version of the Geneva Model, consisting not only of a model of discourse *structure* but, more globally, of an interactionist and modular approach to discourse *organization*. This revised version of our approach to discourse has been developed in various articles published since 1990 in the *Cahiers de linguistique française*,[1] and is presented extensively in two recent books published in French (Roulet, 1999; Roulet et al., 2001).

It is this later conception of the Geneva Model of discourse analysis that we briefly sketch in this article. In order to do so, we clarify some basic principles underlying our approach (1). In the final section of the article, we study a text

extract from a service encounter and apply the modular methodology to the analysis of request sequences (2).

1. Some underlying principles

Similar to any other set of methodological propositions, the Geneva Model of discourse analysis is deeply embedded in global issues currently being discussed in the disciplinary field to which it belongs. Consequently, it inevitably shares assumptions with some other approaches to language use, and presents significant contrasts with regard to others. In order to clarify the position of the Geneva Model, it is useful to give a brief outline of some of its underlying principles. In what follows, we specify the components of our approach by evoking the Geneva Model's relationship to data (1.1); communicative action (1.2); complexity (1.3) and discourse organization (1.4); finally we examine the Model's methodology (1.5).

1.1 DISCOURSE AS NATURALLY OCCURRING TALK OR TEXT

Following the mainstream of discourse analysis, the Geneva Model focuses on the study of naturally occurring talk or texts. As a result, our term 'discourse' refers to complex communicative realities embedded in the real world and related to existing speech events. More specifically, and as pointed out recently by Kuyumcuyan (2002), the study of discourse consists of analysing the traces left by such communicative practices (audio or video tapes, texts) by means of various semiotic artefacts such as transcriptions or notes.

Assuming the centrality of 'real data' leads to the following well-known implications. The first implication, in line with the work of Bally (1913), is that beyond a description of the linguistic system (Saussure's concept of *langue*), the study of actual language use constitutes a legitimate and relevant domain of investigation for linguistic research. Second, in contrast to current trends in micro-pragmatics (Sperber and Wilson, 1986), little value is given to isolated and artificial material invented by researchers for the purpose of their analysis. Finally, taking into account the remarks of Brown and Yule (1983),[2] real data enable the study of complex texts or talk, that are likely to be representative of actual discourse practices.

It may be helpful, at this point, to specify the use we make of empirical data. The approach we develop takes the position that a model of discourse analysis should not focus exclusively on the 'description' of data. Nor should it be devoted to the study of one particular discourse *genre*. Rather, it should concentrate on the dialectical relation between theoretical considerations and empirical illustrations, and rely on naturally occurring discourse segments – as long as they present sufficient general interest to inform a global model of the organization of discourse. Moreover, from our perspective, the validity of a theoretical model results from its ability to account for any kind of discourse *genre*, regardless of its written or oral form, of its monological or dialogical nature, or of its institutional

or non-institutional character. This is the reason why the research conducted in Geneva over the last decades comprised texts or talks from a variety of discursive *genres*, ranging from service encounters (Auchlin and Zenone, 1980; Roulet, 1995; Filliettaz, 2002) to media interviews (Burger, forthcoming; Burger and Filliettaz, forthcoming), political debates (Miche, 1998), manifestos (Burger, 2002) or literary texts (Roulet, 1999; Kuyumcuyan, 2002), to quote a few examples. More than a mere illustration of predefined theoretical categories, the description of such a wide set of empirical data has clearly helped to enrich the set of concepts and descriptive instruments we need in order to develop a systematic framework for discourse analysis.

1.2 DISCOURSE AS COMMUNICATIVE ACTION

As pointed out earlier in the introduction, one of the major difficulties encountered by the initial Geneva Model was its rather poor perception of contextual information. In contrast with this structure-oriented approach, the conception of discourse organization we have since developed defines texts or talks as essentially 'situated' and assumes that contexts significantly affect how discourse realities are produced and interpreted.

In line with other currents of thought in the French-speaking tradition (Bronckart, 1997) and in different Anglo-Saxon countries (Fairclough, 1995; Van Dijk, 1997a, 1997b; Scollon, 2000), we assume that contextual analysis should not consist of a mere description of parameters associated with one particular situation (the context, number of participants, goals, etc.). Rather, it should be articulated with a systematic inquiry into the conceptual domain of *social action*. That is, an understanding of how social actions are being carried out and negotiated constitutes a significant source of new insights for describing how contextual information shapes discourse structures.[3]

More specifically, what has sometimes been termed the 'action turn' of discourse analysis (Vernant, 1997) takes the position that talk should be described not only as abstract semiotic forms, but also in terms of the social activities engaged in by specific agents belonging to particular cultural communities.[4] Following Maingueneau (1995) and Charaudeau (1995), we consider that analysing discourse not only refers to a determined domain of empirical realities – that of naturally occurring texts or talks – but also consists of adopting a specific approach to such empirical realities, that of relating speech units to situated actions accomplished by specific individuals.

Consequently, analysing language use implies the recognition of a complex and 'dialectical relationship between a particular discursive event and the situation(s), institution(s) and social structure(s) which frame it' (Wodak, 1997: 173). On one hand, talk is shaped by social action in the sense that it is interpreted and described in relation to specific contexts and speech genres (Bakhtin, 1986; Adam, 1992, 1999); on the other hand, talk shapes that context by coordinating joint projects (Clark, 1996), aligning identities and roles (Zimmerman, 1998; Hall et al., 1999; Burger and Filliettaz, forthcoming),

reproducing ideologies (Van Dijk, 1998), transforming social representations (Van Dijk, 1990) or even organizing mental structures (Vygotsky, 1962; Harré and Gillett, 1994). It is in this sense that texts or talks may be seen as empirical expressions of psycho–social realities that go far beyond the construction of lexico–syntactic structures.

In other words, it appears that language use is best conceived as a *mediational means* for coordinating joint actions, that is 'as the semiotic means through which a mediated action, i.e. any social action, is carried out (communicated)' (Scollon, 2001); it is by producing and interpreting speech that agents negotiate the validity of their goal-directed actions and coordinate complex structures of social actions. From this perspective, discourse realities can be described as not just social actions, but also as a specific subtype of social actions, namely *communicative actions*, to quote Habermas's (1984) terminology.

By conceptualizing discourse as communicative action, the Geneva Model clearly subscribes to the epistemological assumptions shared by the *interactionist* tradition. As recently stated by Bronckart (1997), adopting the position of socio-discursive interactionism consists of describing semiotic forms as addressed and evaluated realities, which over time become grounded in social actors' habitus. From this standpoint, analysing communicative actions means going beyond a clear-cut delimitation between cognitive and socio–constructionist approaches to context. Mediated by general cultural expectations (discursive *genres*, frames, practices, etc.), but necessarily negotiated in specific situations, discourse realities cannot be reduced to predetermined sets of scripted conducts. Nor can they be described satisfactorily as strictly emergent processes. Rather, they must be analysed as a combination of both typified social knowledge and interpersonal negotiation.

1.3 COMPLEXITY

An interactionist position also assumes the complex nature of discourse realities and demands that we take into account the plurality and variety of components mobilized in its description. Following Charaudeau (1995: 97), this model assumes that language use entails at the very least: (a) a cognitive dimension; (b) a social and psycho-social dimension; and (c) a semiological dimension. Moreover, as mentioned by Bronckart (1997: 80), texts and talks depend on multiple and heterogeneous parameters ranging from situated actions and speech genres to discourse types, text structures and linguistic components. In sum, it appears that:

> . . . discourse analysts tend to theoretically decompose discourse at various layers, dimensions or levels and at the same time to mutually relate such levels. These levels represent different types of phenomena involved in discourse, such as sounds, forms, meanings, or action. (Van Dijk, 1997a: 30)

The Geneva Model takes the complex nature of discourse realities as the starting point of its methodological proposals and seeks to elaborate systematic and

empirically validated solutions to the crucial question of complexity. More specifically, this approach aims to capture this complexity by combining information at three distinct levels of analysis: the *situational*, *textual* and *linguistic* levels. From this perspective, discourse realities are best described as organized semiotic forms related to both linguistic conventions and situated actions.

Aligning ourselves with Bakhtin's (1972) proposals, we call for a top-down methodology that describes discourse with reference to (a) the real situations in which it is used, (b) the textual configurations it gives rise to, and (c) the conventional resources it conveys and draws from. In various ways, such a top-down methodology contrasts with other paradigms – such as radical pragmatics, for example (Reboul and Moeschler, 1998) – that tend to privilege a reductionist approach focused exclusively on *propositions* conceived as the elementary building blocks of communicative processes. From this viewpoint, the complexity of discourse organization cannot be reduced to the mere combination of a plurality of statements. Nor can it be described comprehensively in terms of processing information and making inferences. Rather, it results both from the constructed character of speech production and from the variety of interrelated levels of information inherent in such semiotic realities.

Thus, it is important to clarify the kind of relation we postulate between these various levels of analysis. In fact, presenting linguistic, textual and situational factors as distinct sources of information does not mean that we envisage a clear-cut delimitation between these components and that we subscribe to strict disciplinary boundaries such as linguistics, pragmatics or psycho–sociology. Rather, discourse is defined essentially as a combination of such phenomena and as a privileged locus for integrating the various disciplines to which it belongs. It therefore follows that the very aim of our model lies neither in linguistic, nor textual and situational descriptions as such, but in elaborating new ways of articulating these levels of analysis.

1.4 DESCRIBING REGULARITIES IN DISCOURSE ORGANIZATION

In order to complete this brief presentation of some basic principles presupposed in our model, it may be helpful to specify the kind of results we are hoping to achieve when we approach discourse realities. In our view, practising discourse analysis consists mainly of *describing* complex semiotic realities and determining their most significant characteristics at various organizational levels. Aligning ourselves with Ricoeur's hermeneutics (1986), we consider that analysing texts or extracts of talk does not consist of a projection of intuitive interpretations, but predominantly calls for an objective examination of the discursive properties underlying such interpretations.

However, in order to make various interpretations explicit, we take the position that a model of discourse analysis should provide more than global epistemological assumptions and abstract conceptual categories. It should also develop explicit *descriptive instruments*. This is the reason why, in the research conducted in Geneva since the 1980s, we constantly aimed to associate our descriptions

with prescribed methodological tools, consisting of defined units of analysis, specific relations between such units and recursive principles. Only through the use of such prescribed hypotheses can we identify regularities in discourse organization and thus prevent a descriptive approach from being an ad hoc set of mere observations.

By focusing on the description of regularities in discourse organization, our model differs significantly from other contemporary paradigms. For instance, unlike radical pragmatics (Reboul and Moeschler, 1998), it does not aim to explain speakers' mental procedures when processing information. In contrast to textual psycholinguistics (Coirier et al., 1996), our model does not just consist of describing the cognitive operations associated with the production and the comprehension of texts. In contrast with what Auchlin (1999) calls 'experiential pragmatics', our model should not be understood as one of discourse competence. Finally, in contrast to critical discourse analysis (Wodak, 1997: 174), our model does not see the study of language use as a committed science and a means for addressing social problems (power, racism, ideology, discrimination, etc.).

1.5 A MODULAR METHODOLOGY

As mentioned earlier, recent developments in language sciences have not failed to view discourse realities as a complex stratification and a combination of varied and heterogeneous components belonging to a plurality of analytical levels (Molino, 1989: 44; Charaudeau, 1995: 97; Bronckart, 1997: 80). Moreover, after almost half a century of systematic research on language use, we already have a wide knowledge of different discourse phenomena such as turn taking (Sacks et al., 1978), speech acts (Searle, 1969), discourse relations (Mann et al., 1992), discourse markers (Ducrot et al., 1980; Ducrot, 1984; Schiffrin, 1987), topical organization (Lambrecht, 1994), discourse types or sequences (Adam, 1992; Bronckart, 1997), face work (Brown and Levinson, 1987), framing (Goffman, 1974; Tannen, 1993), etc.

Nevertheless, when we consider the methodological responses given to such a complex stratification, it is significant that very little effort has been devoted to investigating how these various levels relate to one another. In other words, we are confronted with a diversity and richness of hypotheses and descriptions which are all interesting and which reflect the vastness and complexity of the field of discourse, but we are also facing a major methodological challenge: how to go beyond the heterogeneity of descriptions and models and develop an integrative approach which could account for the complexity and diversity of discourse realities?

The Geneva Model takes this crucial question as the starting point of its investigations, and assumes that a *modular approach* constitutes an interesting and powerful methodology for describing the complexity of discourse organization. A strong and cognitive version of the modularity hypothesis has been formulated by Fodor (1983) and gave rise to interesting controversies (Caron, 1997). It is

therefore crucially important to specify that we adopt a distinct, strictly methodological, version of the modularity hypotheses, which profoundly differs from Fodor's proposals. Following Simon's work (1962), we take the position that any complex system of information can be broken down into a number of elementary subsystems which, when combined, help us to reconstruct problems of progressive complexity. Identifying and combining these elementary subsystems enables us to capture complex realities by means of accessible and accountable subproblems.

In recent years, such a methodological conception of the modularity hypothesis has been developed into various domains of language sciences (Nølke and Adam, 2000), and gave rise to fruitful research devoted to the description of *langue* (Nølke, 1994, 2000) or to that of various pragmatic units (Kasher, 1991; Motsch, 1991). Aligning ourselves with such perspectives, we take the position that a modular approach can be applied successfully to the description of discourse organization.

Adopting a modular methodology towards the description of discourse assumes that texts or extracts of talk may be analysed in terms of different and interrelated phenomena of varying complexity. More specifically, such an approach aims to break down the different facets of discourse organization to their simplest primitive elements and to describe the wide complexity and diversity of the discourses we observe as the result of a progressive combination between these pieces of information. Two main requirements are associated with a modular approach to discourse: first, to identify, isolate and define a restricted set of dimensions relating to elementary information; and, second, to describe precisely how these various dimensions of elementary information may be combined in order to account for complex discourse processes. In order to satisfy these requirements, we consider two distinct theoretical categories, with regard to two major steps in our analysis: (a) *modules*, and (b) *organization forms*:

(a) *Modules* constitute the building blocks of a modular approach. They are the components of the model dealing with the elementary dimensions of discourse organization. Following Nølke's (1994: 77) definition, they consist of coherent, maximally economical and notionally independent subsystems of information. For instance, the *hierarchical* structure of a discourse segment can be characterized independently of its *syntactic* or *lexical* structures. Consequently, each module refers to a restricted set of elementary information and circumscribes a specific domain of discourse organization (syntax, lexicon, textual hierarchy, domain of reference, interactional materiality).

(b) *Organization forms* are complex units of analysis. In contrast to modules, they do not consist of elementary systems of information, but result from what we call 'couplings'[5] between such elementary subsystems. For instance, it is by combining *syntactic* and *lexical* information that one can account for the *semantic* organization of propositions. More specifically, we make a distinction between two types of organization forms: those resulting

from a combination of elementary modules (*elementary organization forms*); and those combining elementary modules with other organization forms (*complex organization forms*). In our view, discourse phenomena such as topic organization (Grobet, 2002), polyphony (Roulet, 1997b), story telling (Filliettaz, 1999a), discourse strategies (Roulet et al., 2001: ch. 12), etc. are best described as complex organization forms: they cannot be reduced to one homogeneous and isolated set of information, but result from a combination of a variety of linguistic, textual and situational components.

It is important to distinguish a modular approach from a multi-dimensional or multi-level one. Adopting a multi-dimensional approach of discourse organization involves making an eclectic collection of the results of studies on different dimensions of discourse organization in order to obtain a more complete picture of discourse organization. However, adopting a modular approach involves identifying a restricted set of elementary components and accounting for complex discourse phenomena in terms of systematic combinations between these elementary elements.

Space limitations of this article do not permit a comprehensive presentation of the modular architecture elaborated by the Geneva Model (see Roulet et al., 2001: ch. 2). Nevertheless, it may be useful to briefly mention some of its methodological advantages. From a theoretical perspective, a modular approach may appear to be a fruitful instrument for combining research conducted on various discourse phenomena into an integrated model of discourse analysis. More specifically, it enables us to show that different conceptual categories, presented as exclusive in different approaches, are equally relevant for a comprehensive description of discourse realities, but that they belong to different analytical levels. In addition, subscribing to the modularity hypothesis may help us to conduct a detailed analysis of various discourse phenomena: as suggested by Nølke (2000), we are thus able to give both a precise description of the elementary dimensions of language use and a simple description of complex levels of discourse organization.

In order to complete a theoretical presentation of the Geneva Model with a description of empirical data, we now present a case study in order to illustrate how an interactionist and modular approach to discourse organization may inform a fine-grained analysis of request sequences in service encounters.

2. Negotiating requests in service encounters: a case study

2.1 A DISCURSIVE ANALYSIS OF SERVICE ENCOUNTERS

The selling of goods or the provision of a service requires the performance of a vast array of specific tasks, most of them being mediated by talk or texts. Assuming the position of a shop assistant, for instance, requires an ability to advise customers, facilitate their choices, coordinate with colleagues, make phone calls, locate specific information in catalogues or other various semiotic

supports. Usually, most of the 'frontstage' or 'backstage' activities that assistants engage in are being carried out through communicational means. From this standpoint, public service encounters can be seen as a very relevant domain of investigation for language sciences, since they may help to illustrate the importance of *discursive practices* in the construction of social activities.

Quite surprisingly, when we consider the empirical data described by discourse analysts in a work-oriented perspective, it clearly appears that the domain of public service encounters has been given little attention. Of course, there have been significant contributions to the description of service provider–customer communication in different disciplinary fields such as conversational analysis (Aston, 1988; Ylänne-McEwen, 1996), systemic linguistics (Ventola, 1987) and workplace studies (Joseph and Jeannot, 1995). However, these are very isolated approaches in comparison to the wide-ranging research that has been carried out on education, social care, law, media or health institutions.

The data used for this case study are extracted from a large corpus of service encounters that were audio-recorded in Geneva in the early 1980s. In this short excerpt,[6] translated from French, a customer (C) enters a bookshop looking for a specific book on French vocabulary:

1 C: bonjour
good morning
2 B: monsieur?
Sir?
3 C: j'aimerais un livre sur le vocabulaire français s'il vous plaît
I'm looking for a book on French vocabulary please
4 B: comment sur
what do you mean by on?
5 C: l'école vous savez un livre vert
you know for school a green book
6 il fut un temps qu'il existait
it has been used for quite a while
7 B: c'est pas "l'ortho-vert"?
would it be "l'ortho-vert"?
8 C: euh::.. je crois pas
eeer::.. I don't think so
9 B: je ne crois pas que je l'aie
I don't think I have it
10 c'est pas ça?
isn't it this one?
11 C: il est plus grand il est plus fin
it's bigger and not as thick
12 je me souviens je l'avais à l'école primaire
I remember I had it in primary school
13 B: mais c'est un livre de vocabulaire?
but it's a vocabulary book?
14 C: ouais uniquement. il y a que du vocabulaire
yes that's all it is. only vocabulary

15 pour apprendre le vocabulaire français
to learn French vocabulary
16 B: ah non alors écoutez alors c'est peut-être "Français accéléré". c'est pas ça?
oh no then look maybe it's "Français accéléré". that's not it?
17 C: non c'est pas du tout ça
no that isn't it at all
18 B: c'est pas le "Mauger"?
it's not the "Mauger"?
19 C: ah:: ils le servent à l'école primaire
ah:: they use it in primary school
20 B: ici à Genève?
here in Geneva?
21 C: oui
yes
22 B: oui alors j'ai pas ces bouquins scolaires
yes then I don't have those school books
23 C: où est-ce qu'on peut les trouver?
where can they be found?
24 B: chez Payot. éventuellement
at Payot's. perhaps
25 C: là -bas?
over there?
26 B: ouais juste là . à la rue Grenand. peut-être
yes right there. in Grenand street. perhaps
27 C: je vous remercie hein Monsieur
thank you Sir
28 B: allez au revoir
good bye

In this excerpt, we first see that a dialogue is being structured progressively by means of a complex network of discursive contributions. More important, we see that this dialogue takes place in a specific setting (a bookshop) in which two individuals take up specific situated identities (Zimmerman, 1998; Burger and Filliettaz, forthcoming) in order to achieve a joint activity (Clark, 1996), namely a commercial transaction. A systematic description of speech in this excerpt cannot therefore be reduced to lexical, syntactic, or even textual categories alone. Rather it is of crucial importance to take into consideration the fact that the bookseller and the customer share social knowledge regarding, for instance, how to carry out a service encounter and how to deal with conceptual items such as BOOK, VOCABULARY, SCHOOL, etc. In other words, the organization of discourse realities is not only determined by linguistic or textual constraints; it is also mediated by situational components. This is why it calls for a '*thick description*' that 'reaches down to the level of fine-grained linguistic analysis and up and out to broader ethnographic description' (Sarangi and Roberts, 1999: 1).

In the following sections of this article, we adopt a modular methodology in order to shed some light on the complex but insufficiently described links between discourse, conceptual knowledge and the construction of joint activities. More specifically, we focus on a detailed analysis of the construction of

requests in service encounters. From a discourse analytical perspective, requests turn out to be very interesting discursive phenomena as they stress the importance of both textual construction and situational information (2.2). Consequently, these constructions constitute relevant semiotic material for an integrated description of hierarchical structures, praxeological processes and conceptual negotiation (2.3).

2.2 REQUESTS AS COMPLEX DISCURSIVE PRACTICES

When taking a micro-pragmatic approach such as, for example, speech act theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969), requests have often been considered to be prototypical members of a specific class of speech acts, namely *directives*, whose purpose is to invite the listener to take up an action in the future. Although this taxonomic model has incontestably led to fruitful insights regarding the performative dimension of language use, it seems to us that it fails to account for the complexity of requests in at least two distinct ways. First, this model presupposes that formulating a request is dependent on the performance of an isolated utterance by a single speaker; and, second, it postulates that an utterance's semiotic resources are reducible to a set of semantic properties that can be explained by logical conditions.

Both of these assumptions seem to be contradicted by empirical data. Indeed, if we return to the brief extract quoted earlier, we cannot fail to notice that determining the object of the transaction results from a complex discursive sequence co-constructed by both the customer and the bookseller, and that what can be referred to as a request must be considered as the product of that whole semiotic unit rather than an isolated utterance such as "I'm looking for a book on French vocabulary please." Moreover, the co-construction of such a complex determination requires referential information that goes far beyond the scope of necessary and sufficient logical criteria.

In what follows, we argue that, from the perspective of a modular approach, requests should be considered as complex discursive practices that cannot be reduced to the utterance of single speech acts or to a bundle of semantic conditions. In order to do so, we hypothesize that carrying out such discursive practices necessitates linking information emanating from a variety of distinct sources: knowledge regarding social action (2.2.1), conceptual knowledge (2.2.2) and textual competence (2.2.3). It is only by combining these various levels of discursive organization, that we can account for what is at stake when, for instance, customers ask for specific goods in service encounters.

In order to carry out this analysis, we explain the descriptive tools used in two distinct modules of the Geneva Model: the referential module and the hierarchical one. On the situational level, the *referential* module deals with the complex links relating discourse to its referential domains, namely the world in which it takes place as well as the world(s) it refers to. In our view, these complex links can be analysed by describing how praxeological (2.2.1) and conceptual categories (2.2.2) are negotiated in discourse processes. On the textual level, the *hierarchical*

module refers to the recursive categories and rules accounting for the structures of both monological and dialogical discourses. Mainly derived from the propositions presented in the initial Geneva Model (Roulet et al., 1985), this module argues that speakers perform organized speech units in order to negotiate complex semiotic forms (2.2.3).

2.2.1 Requests as complex praxeological structures As shown in the data, requests cannot be seen as decontextualized isolates. Deeply embedded in the predetermined *activity types* in which they arise, they are closely linked to situated social practices with specific goals and specific constraints. In this case, the complex discursive practice of the request can be considered to take place in an interactive, praxeological configuration, namely a service encounter. As joint activities, service encounters involve a plurality of participants (a customer; a bookseller) who, in order to arrive at their distinct individual objectives (buy a book on French vocabulary; manage a bookshop) must coordinate their participatory actions (explain the needs related to given items; make these items available) around a common goal (carrying out a buying/information transaction).

In order to coordinate their distinct but interdependent contributions to these joint processes, agents may apply general pragmatic principles such as the Cooperation Principle (Grice, 1979), the Politeness Principle (Brown and Levinson, 1987) or the Principle of Joint Salience (Clark, 1996), but they may also mobilize a set of social representations regarding expected conducts in specialized settings. For the individuals taking part in the transaction quoted earlier, one can consider for instance that service encounters constitute well-known everyday situations that give rise to a *praxeological competence* consisting of scripts or at least prototypical representations. Following Schank and Abelson (1977), such scripts are available as the participants' common ground and are associated with requirements regarding specific roles (e.g. customer, bookseller) and appropriate sequences of events (e.g. greetings, requests, supply of goods, payment, etc.).

That said, it is important not to give too much weight to such praxeological constraints, as they could ultimately lead to a deterministic conception of social action. As pointed out by Suchman (1987: 50), planning should best be viewed as a weak resource for acting, since 'every course of action depends in essential ways upon its material and social circumstances'. Thus, admitting that current everyday situations are handled through scripts or scenarios does not deny the fact that interactants share an ability to negotiate a joint construction of situated actions. In order to capture that dynamic achievement of complex goal-directed processes such as service encounters, one can describe specific sequences of joint actions as *praxeological structures* (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 attempts to account for the hierarchical and sequential organization of goal-directed interactions (Von Cranach et al., 1982). It shows that, in order to realize a joint construction of a particular service encounter, the customer

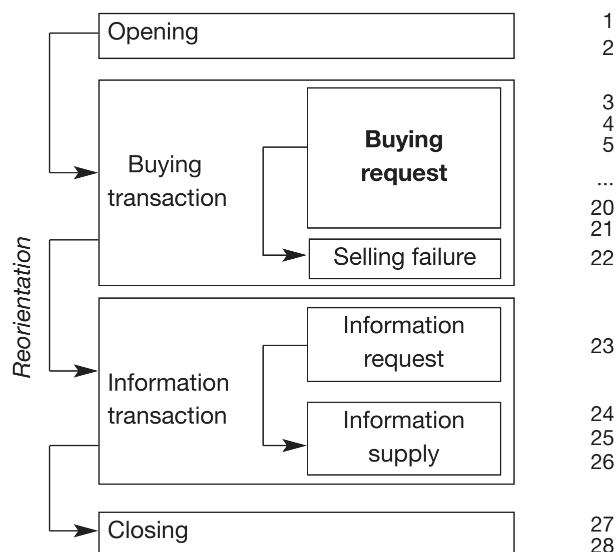

FIGURE 1. *Praxeological structure.*

and the bookseller go through a variety of specific structured episodes: after a brief opening section consisting of greetings, the customer initiates a buying transaction by mentioning a book he needs ("I'm looking for a book on French vocabulary please", line 3). The object of the request being insufficiently specified in this utterance, it takes the interactants almost 15 turns of talk before they manage to complete the request episode. As the required book turns out to be unavailable in that particular bookshop ("yes then I don't have those school books", line 22), the transaction is then reoriented into another one focused on a request for information ("where can they be found?", line 23). Once the information has been provided by the bookseller, the closing rituals can take place and the transaction comes to an end.

Although it incontestably leads to a reified simplification of human conducts, the praxeological structure of the encounter highlights two interesting features of social interactions: the fact that they are mediated by common-sense knowledge regarding sequential organization; and the fact that they result from various developments and reorientations that attest to the co-constructed character of situated actions. In that sense, they capture both schematic and emergent properties of joint activities.

Moreover, the praxeological structure of this business transaction indicates that requests always appear in particular contexts dominated by specific goals, and that this situational information constrains the successful outcomes of such utterances. More specifically, we have to consider that, as the request is embedded in a buying transaction taking place in a particular bookshop, it needs additional specification. This is why a global theoretical approach to such discursive

sequences should not neglect the referential dimension and characterize requests as specific episodes of joint activities.

2.2.2 Requests as complex conceptual structures The situational complexity of request sequences does not only follow from the praxeological configurations in which such discourse practices arise. Rather, it is also partly attributable to the conceptual domain of reference in which the interactants have to operate in order to carry out the joint activities they are engaged in. Indeed, from a cognitive perspective, an adequate management of discourse structures implies background knowledge regarding objects, beings or abstract notions, i.e. conceptual categories. For example, the successful outcome of a request such as the one under analysis presupposes that the interacting agents share and negotiate attributes applicable to notions such as BOOK, VOCABULARY, SCHOOL, etc. Thus, verbal interactions are mediated not only by praxeological resources, but also by a conceptual competence.

For almost half a century, questions relating to conceptual knowledge and categorization have constituted crucial issues within the field of cognitive sciences. How do people classify objects they have to deal with in their cognitive environment? How do they proceed in order to recognize a plurality of objects as members of the same category? Unarguably, these are all questions that have deep ramifications in discourse analysis. Amongst the vast amount of research that has been conducted in this field, the *theory of prototypes*, developed in the 1970s, offers a significant source of new insights for the taxonomic structure of category systems. According to Rosch (1978: 36), for instance, categories (e.g. seats) are associated both with central members (e.g. a chair), whose classification seems quite unproblematic, and with other items that are perceived as being more or less distant from these central members (e.g. steps). What results from a conceptualization such as this is that categories do not have clear-cut boundaries and can no longer be seen as a limited set of necessary and sufficient criteria. Rather, one has to consider that members of a category share a *family resemblance* with other elements called *prototypes*, that is 'the clearest cases of category membership defined operationally by people's judgments of goodness of membership in the category' (p. 36). Moreover, it is these central items that lead to the definition of attributes that appear as maximally distinctive to a given category. One of the main contributions of the prototype hypothesis then is that it accounts for the fuzzy character of category boundaries and brings interesting clues to a model of conceptual knowledge.

According to this view, one has to consider that the perception of reality is not as an infinite flow of unstructured stimuli, but that it is organized as a network of usable cognitive portions which are culturally constructed. One can therefore hypothesize that members of a social community associate conceptual categories (e.g. book) with specific prototypical properties (e.g. author, title, date of publication) and that these sets of properties structure their common conceptual knowledge.

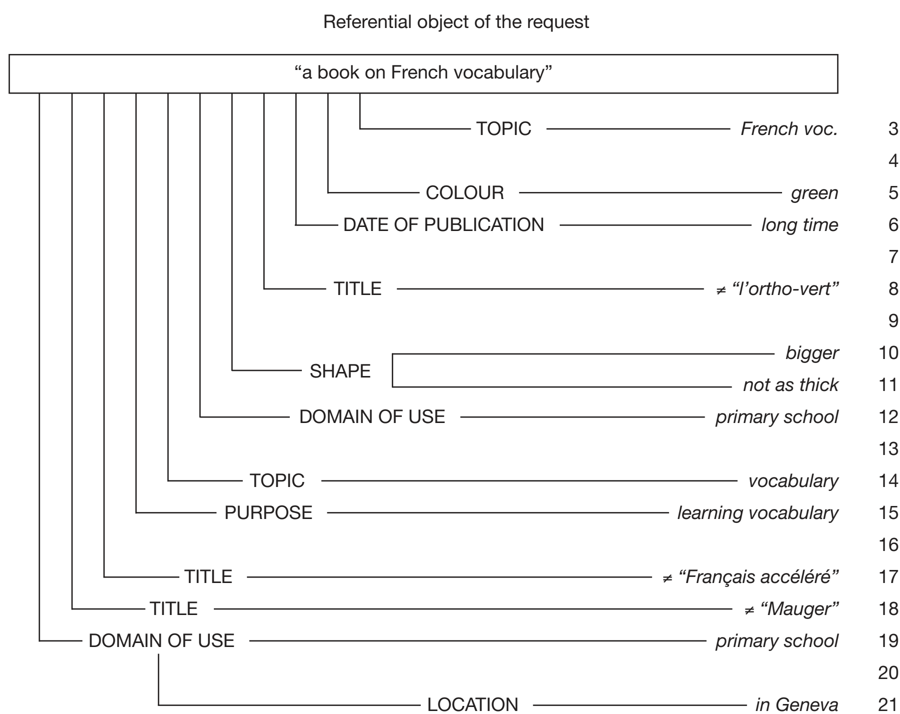

FIGURE 2. *Conceptual structure.*

Although everyday situations are partly mediated by collective representations, social interaction should not be reduced to such a common knowledge. Indeed, in situated discourse productions, conceptual categories are not just part of the common ground; they are above all jointly negotiated by the discourse-producing agents. This process of conceptual negotiation is particularly well illustrated in our excerpt, where the bookseller and the customer attribute various properties to the referent BOOK in order to achieve an intersubjectively satisfactory representation of the transactional object. From this perspective, conceptual representations are context specific and can be described as a finite set of negotiated attributes articulated in a *conceptual structure* appropriate to this encounter (see Figure 2).

The conceptual structure presented in Figure 2 describes the dynamic process that underlies conceptual negotiation in this specific context. It shows how the bookseller and the customer progressively assign various properties to the required book (e.g. topic, colour, date of publication, title, domain of use, etc.) in order to achieve a joint symbolic construction of the transactional object.

In addition, this network of negotiated attributes demonstrates the importance of conceptual categories in the discursive construction of request sequences. Indeed, it is by means of such attributions that these discursive practices can be

completed and that service transactions may be carried out successfully. This is why requests should also be considered as complex conceptual structures.

2.2.3 Requests as complex textual moves The joint action of negotiating request sequences leads to the construction of complex textual units. In order to complete transactional episodes, the bookseller and the customer coordinate linguistic productions that take place into organized dialogue structures. It is therefore noteworthy that agents taking part in verbal interactions base their practices on a *textual competence* that dictates the construction of complex communicative forms.

Among the vast amount of research that has been devoted to the question of textual organization in oral discourse (Sinclair and Coulthard, 1975; Labov and Fanshel, 1977; Sacks et al., 1978), the hierarchical model developed in Geneva since the beginning of the 1980s offers a flexible and unified method of analysis that accounts for an unlimited range of linguistic production belonging to various discursive genres (see 1). In contrast to conversational analysis, the hierarchical model of textual organization is based on an integrated structure for both dialogical and monological discourse. Moreover, this model hypothesizes that dialogues are not dependent on turns organized in adjacency pairs, but follow a limited set of constraints that account for the complexity and variety of discourse structures. More specifically, it is assumed that dialogue structures reflect a process of *negotiation* in which speakers recursively *initiate* propositions, *react* to them and ultimately *ratify* them.

In order to carry out these negotiations, interactants produce communicative constituents of various textual complexity, and they do so on three hierarchical levels: *exchanges*, *moves* and *acts*. *Exchanges* are seen to function as the maximal dialogical textual projection of a negotiation process; they are made up of moves that reflect the various *proposition*, *reaction* and *ratification* processes required for a given negotiation. *Moves* present themselves as organized structures: they may be restricted to a main act (e.g. C: “I’m looking for a book on French vocabulary please”), but more frequently, they are formed by a complex configuration of other moves or acts (e.g. C: “I’m looking for a book on French vocabulary. It’s for school”) and exchanges (e.g. C: “I’m looking for a book on French vocabulary” – B: “what do you mean by on?” – C: “you know a green book”) that are subordinated to it. Finally, the notion of *act* refers to the smallest textual segment that contributes to a process of negotiation.

Before closing this brief sketch of the hierarchical hypothesis, it should be noted that dialogue structures are associated with two distinct completion principles. The *principle of dialogical completion* states that an exchange comes to an end when both interactants agree on the closure of a negotiation process, whereas the *principle of monological completion* states that each move constituting an exchange should provide sufficiently relevant information in order to function as an adequate contribution to a negotiation process. This explains why moves are frequently formulated by means of a complex sequence of acts, moves and subordinate exchanges.

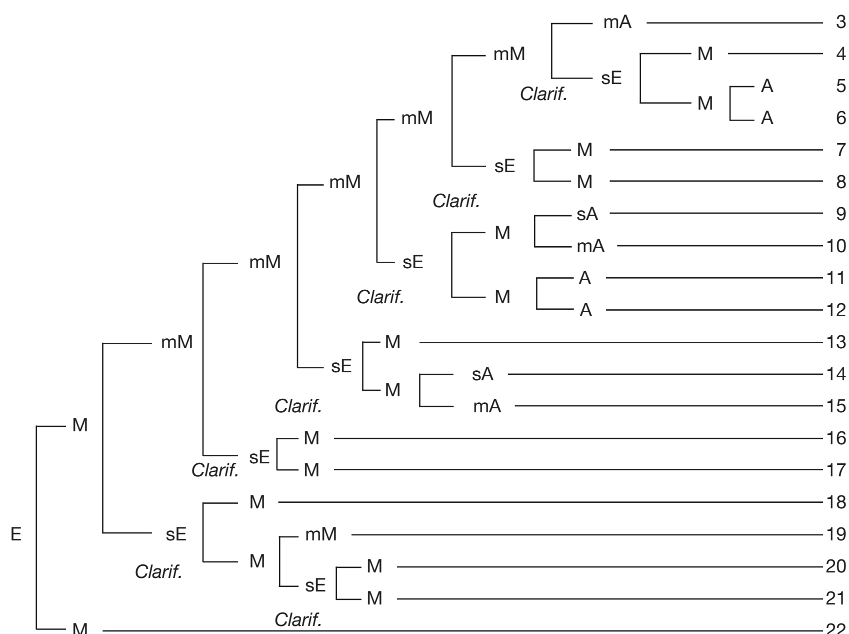

FIGURE 3. *Hierarchical structure.*

This latter principle can be emblematically illustrated in our example, where the move verbalizing the request gives rise to a complex textual configuration in which various linguistic units integrate at different hierarchical levels, as indicated by the *textual structure* in Figure 3.

Beyond an apparent effect of complexity, Figure 3 reflects a basic discursive reality, namely the textual construction of an attempt to buy a specific book. Of course, one might propose different hierarchical structures of this excerpt, corresponding to different interpretations of its construction. More specifically, Figure 3 shows that this particular transaction is carried out by means of a negotiated exchange consisting of two interdependent moves: the first move (lines 3–21) initiates the exchange by introducing and completing a request; the second move (line 22) closes this exchange by providing an answer to the request. As for the internal structure of the entire first move, it is made more complex because of a delayed agreement on the monological completion principle. Indeed, the initial request formulated by the customer ("I'm looking for a book on French vocabulary", line 3) is evaluated as insufficiently clear by the bookseller ("what do you mean by on?", line 4) and gives rise to a subordinated exchange meant to clarify the proposition. Similarly and recurrently, six other requests for clarification are initiated in order to specify the customer's request ("would it be 'l'ortho-vert'?", line 7; "isn't it this one?", line 10; "but it's a vocabulary book?", line 13; "maybe

it's Français accéléré. that's not it?", line 16; "it's not the Mauger?", line 18; "here in Geneva?", line 20). It is only after the successful negotiation of seven subordinate exchanges that the monological completion principle is finally satisfied and that a real account of the request can take place ("yes then I don't have those school books", line 22).

Consequently, from the perspective of textual organization, the construction of this specific request should be regarded as the result of a complex semiotic move, rather than as a single and isolated utterance.

2.3 LINKING TEXTUAL AND SITUATIONAL INFORMATION

So far, distinct descriptions have been presented, with the aim of highlighting some of the various sources of information that are involved in the joint construction of request sequences. As a result, situational elements such as praxeological structures (2.2.1) and conceptual negotiation (2.2.2) have been clearly dissociated from the construction of textual realities (2.2.3), and two central dimensions of discourse organization have been presented: the *referential* dimension and the *hierarchical* one. Nevertheless, a modular approach to discourse structures should not just consist of a description of isolated levels of discourse organization. Rather, as indicated earlier (1.5), it is the coupling of these various sources of information that enables an account of complex discursive phenomena. This is why, as a second step of our analysis, it is important to link textual and situational components of the discourse practices described so far.

If we consider, for instance, both the praxeological (2.2.1) and conceptual (2.2.2) structures of the excerpt, we can detect close connections between these two facets of referential information: the negotiation of conceptual attributes functions as the main purpose of a praxeological episode such as a request; conversely, the nature of the goals lying behind the whole encounter partly determines the profile of situated conceptual structures. This case therefore emblematically illustrates the interdependent character of object knowledge and praxeological competence and demonstrates that there are context effects for conceptual categorization. Also, as mentioned by Rosch (1978: 45), our example highlights the fact that prototypical category members play a prominent role in expected events that occur in everyday situations.

As for the coupling of the conceptual structure (2.2.2) with textual information (2.2.3), this also constitutes a significant source of fruitful observations for the discursive analysis of request sequences. For instance, the textual configuration of the global move supporting the request emphasizes the clarification strategy required for concept negotiation. Almost every ratified attribute associated with the transactional object is negotiated by means of subordinate exchanges. Conversely, conceptual constraints help to shed some light on the textual configuration specific to that particular episode. Indeed, as mentioned earlier, it is mainly due to the fact that interactants face problems in completing an acceptable representation of the transactional object that the monological completion principle is delayed and that seven clarification exchanges have to be performed.

Finally, it is also very instructive to link praxeological structures (2.2.1) with information regarding textual organization (2.2.3).[7] For instance, the principles pertaining to linguistic sequences such as dialogues constitute powerful *mediational means* (Scollon, 2001) that enable a joint construction of complex teleological processes. As shown by our analysis, it is thanks to organized verbal production that transactional episodes can be initiated and completed. However, it is noteworthy that praxeological processes play a crucial role in language use, since 'the structural properties specific to activities set up strong expectations about the functions that any utterances at a certain point in the proceedings can be fulfilling' (Levinson, 1992: 79).

3. Concluding comments

While it is not a fully comprehensive treatment of all the issues raised by contextual information in linguistic research, our analysis of request sequences has explored the complex links between discourse realities as well as conceptual knowledge and the construction of joint activities. More specifically, it has illustrated the main contributions made by a modular approach to the new challenges associated with the recent development of discourse analysis. By applying a range of explicit descriptive principles to naturally occurring discourse realities, such an approach provides the analyst with a set of restricted theoretical tools (e.g. *praxeological structures*, *conceptual structures*, *hierarchical structures*, etc.) that enable a detailed account of various contextual and textual components. In addition, by connecting the various levels of analysis that belong to distinct analytical modules, it contributes to an integrated model of discourse complexity.

Above all, a modular approach to discourse organization emphasizes the close connections that exist between semiotic forms and psycho–social resources. As shown by our analysis, actual language use is deeply associated with social knowledge regarding both praxeological and conceptual categories. In contrast, if one accepts Harré and Gillett's (1994) proposal that 'individual and private uses of symbolic systems . . . are derived from interpersonal discursive processes' (p. 27), then speech may also be regarded as a powerful means for constructing and negotiating social knowledge. From this perspective, a discourse analytical approach based on interaction and modularity turns out to be one of the possible paths of exploration for bridging the gap between language use, social action and cognitive resources in contemporary linguistic research.

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NOTES

1. All the members of the research group (Marcel Burger, Anne Grobet, Elisabeth Miche, Laurent Perrin and Corinne Rossari) played an active role in the construction of the model presented here.
2. See Brown and Yule (1983):

   In fact we might . . . state that much of the research reported in the literature on issues like 'topic', 'text-structure' and 'text-content' has been restricted to such unrepresentative discourse data that the findings are unlikely to have much wider application in the analysis of discourse. The discourse analyst may glean useful insights into some aspects of simple text from this research, but he cannot forever restrict himself to investigating versions of material like 'The farmer and the donkey' or 'The rocket in the desert'. (p. 124)
3. Scollon (2000: 5) mentions a 'principle of social action' stating that 'Discourse is best conceived as a matter of social actions, not as systems of representation or thought or values.'
4. See Van Dijk (1997b):

   We now have a first impression of a crucial dimension of discourse analysis, namely the fact that discourse should be studied not only as form, meaning and mental process, but also as complex structures and hierarchies of interaction and social practice and their functions in context, society and culture. (p. 6)
5. Goffman (1983:11) introduces the notion of 'loose coupling' to characterize the relations between interactional practices and social structures. We use the notion of 'coupling' here in both a wider and stricter sense to characterize as explicitly as possible, through specific metarules, the combination of pieces of information from different modules or other organization forms.
6. We use the following transcription notations: (.) (..) = appropriately timed pauses; (::) = a lengthened syllable; underlining = overlapping talk.
7. For a detailed investigation of that complex theoretical issue, see Filliettaz (1999b, 2002), Bronckart (1997) or Vernant (1997).

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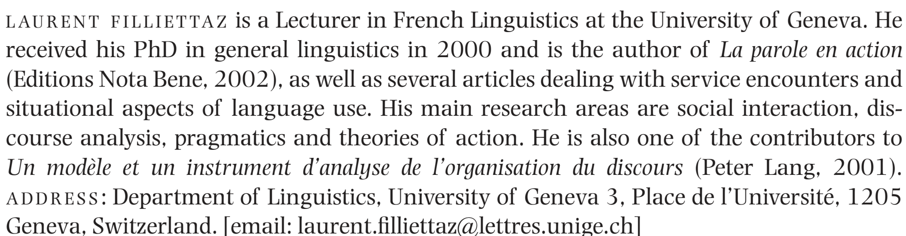

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