

REGINA BLASS. *Relevance Relations in Discourse: A Study with Special Reference to Sissala*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990. Pp. xii + 284.

Reviewed by CARL-ERIK LINDBERG

Regina Blass's contribution to the study of discourse is an application of Sperber and Wilson's well-known relevance theory from 1986 to constructed and authentic language materials in English, German and Sissala. Her book consists of an introduction to the subject and eight main chapters on general discourse and relevance issues (ch. 1-2) and typological and specific language issues within this general framework (ch. 3-8).

Blass's main aim 'is to show how relevance governs discourse' (1) by an approach which combines an ethnographical and a universal or cognitive discourse perspective. For that purpose she has chosen Sissala as a reference language which is structurally very different from European languages such as English and German. Her presentation of the Sissala language and culture, probably little known to most linguists, is comprehensible and of a kind that one would only wish to see more often in books and articles on 'exotic' languages.

In accordance with mainstream discourse analysis (DA) Blass regards 'utterance' as a matter of discourse in opposition to 'sentence' as a matter of grammar, e.g., in the structuralist and generative tradition. Consequently, she distinguishes between the well-formedness of utterances and the grammaticality of sentences, although this distinction also in her treatment seems to be somewhat blurred by the now classical type - token view of the opposition between sentence and utterance, where utterances are seen as merely 'realisations' of sentences (e.g., 'even utterances of ungrammatical sentences can be understood' (9)). However, in DA, which also in the present monography is based primarily on the investigation of actual language materials, it may be more rewarding to look at the problem the other way round and regard the utterance as the point of departure from which the sentence is a kind of abstraction with the status of an abstract unit.

Blass's view of text, co-text and context also adheres to mainstream DA, and, to a greater extent than is normally the case in general linguistics, such categories are unambiguously seen as

categories of cognition rather than categories of the so-called 'real world' (cf., e.g., Schiffrin 1994:passim):

By 'context' I here do not mean the real world or the co-text (the preceding or following text of a discourse); rather it is a set of assumptions retrieved or derived from memory or acquired by perception, and used in the interpretation process (9).

Apart from the psychological jargon (in part taken over from Sperber and Wilson), which does not in itself particularly contribute to the clarity of the issue as a DA issue, the point referred to here remains of great importance for the understanding, in a twofold sense, of discourse: context in DA is knowledge, *not* 'hardware'. Blass's distinction between discourse and text, however, seems a bit more questionable. Whereas 'discourse' is used by her 'as a general term to refer to all acts of verbal communication' (10) which can only be understood in relation to context, it is hardly the case that 'text' can be regarded as 'a purely linguistic, formal object' (10). Both speech (spoken language) and text (written language) are better analysed as subcategories of discourse and therefore both sharing its essential properties, especially the all-important relation to context, without which neither speech nor text can be properly understood.

I agree with Blass that DA primarily has to do with the understanding of utterances (that is, with reception rather than production), although I think it at least premature to claim that DA could not in fact do anything else of importance:

... to me, discourse analysis is nothing else *but* tracing the hearer's part in understanding utterances, and I claim that any other approach either yields uninteresting statements of statistical frequency, or is like going on a journey without a destination in mind (11).

The understanding of utterances according to Blass is additionally dependent on inference and relevance relations in the sense of Sperber and Wilson. Her in fact uncritical reference to their theory in my view nonetheless makes her book an important contribution to the development of the 'interpretive' approach to DA. For Sperber and Wilson as well as for Blass the understanding process requires a pragmatic perspective which is non-modular, because the inferences

involved in this process are non-demonstrative, i.e., they are, in contrast with for instance Chomskyan grammar and semantics, not a matter of coding but of 'working out the intended message' (36). Such inferences are 'open' and creative in a manner that is alien to both formal logic and modular pragmatics. Relevance is globally defined by Sperber and Wilson as a quality of assumptions so that an 'assumption is relevant in a context if and only if it has some contextual effect in that context' (Sperber and Wilson 1986:122). Blass develops her method of investigation with this global relevance definition and the afore-mentioned non-modular view of pragmatics as a point of departure. She rejects a number of other fundamental textual concepts such as coherence, cohesion, connectivity and topic (continuity) because they are in her view first and foremost descriptive of relations between linguistic units and not of relations between utterances and relevant contextual assumptions. Relevance remains, according to Blass, the 'basis for discourse analysis' (76).

In chapters 3 through 8 of her book Blass presents a number of (typological) analyses of Sissala language material within this general framework and shows that her method is able to shed light on a number of problems which are not easily manageable with other methods. Following Sperber and Wilson, she makes a crucial distinction between descriptive and interpretive uses of utterances. This distinction, which is demonstrated to be useful especially for the analysis of so-called hearsay particles and echoic utterances (ch.3), presumably has a much wider scope in that in my view it may contribute considerably to our global understanding of discourse. The descriptive use has to do with actual or conceivable states of affairs and truth-conditional semantics whereas the interpretive use seems to be genuinely 'discursive': it has to do, in different ways, with 'resemblances' between utterances, or thoughts and utterances, as Blass puts it (101). The basic communicative criterion for each type is truthfulness for the descriptive and 'faithfulness' for the interpretive use of utterances (111).

In an over-all DA perspective, I agree with (Sperber and Wilson and) Blass that human beings are most certainly 'constrained by considerations of relevance' (124) in discourse interpretation. In this perspective Blass elaborates on a new 'non-truth-conditional' particle typology (ch. 4), so-called 'pragmatic enrichment' (ch. 5), which is a kind of degree of contextual orientation or knowledge (cf. Sperber and Wilson 1986:185-93), 'defining expressions' (that is, determiners)

and their origin from deictic expressions in Sissala (ch. 6), generic determination and its relation to universal quantification (ch. 7), where some issues in her treatment are however more oriented towards 'classical' truth-conditional analysis/interpretation than towards constraints on relevance (202), and finally stylistic effects in coordination, where syntactic factors (apart from pure grammatical constraints on the lexical use of conjunctions) may cause differences in pragmatic effect in Sissala co-ordinate constructions (ch. 8).

As is often the case in treatises on DA, a number of the discourse examples analysed in Blass prove to be examples where the relations between a small number of *sentences* (or between a sentence and its presuppositions/entailments) are discussed. Although this situation is of course difficult to avoid since the utterances simply have to be represented in writing in a book, the risk of jumping to conclusions because of the lack of real context is obvious. Let me just take one example to illustrate this point. In her analysis of 'even' in English and Sissala on page 156, Blass refers to the following example (it is not clear to me whether the example is her own, but this is irrelevant to the point in question):

John, Bill and even Michael came to the party.

Her analysis of this example is as follows:

The use of *even* encourages the hearer to use the assumption 'Somebody other than Michael came to the party' and suggests that it is unusual for Michael to go to parties.

If this is meant as an example of discourse analysis it is indeed difficult to see any difference at all between this type of analysis and for instance classical structuralist or even traditional sentence analysis. This sentence, as it stands, in fact allows a number of different interpretations, among them clearly the one suggested by Blass. However, it could as well be the case that Michael has the habit of going to parties more often than both John and Bill, but for some reason or other he was simply uneasy about going to the particular party in question. Without any reference to context whatsoever, this example remains a sentence, not an utterance, and the problem remains one of sentence ambiguity, not of utterance interpretation.

A slightly annoying, but no doubt intended, aberration from the norm in Blass's English usage is her frequent (but not entirely consistent) use of 'she' instead of 'he' in anaphoric reference when the antecedent is clearly neutral in reference to the sexes. An example: '... it would be useful for a speaker to have some linguistic device for indicating which way she intends her utterance to be understood - ...' (140). I would not dream of criticising her implicit democratic motive for this use, but in my view the problem in question remains one of grammar and/or style, not of democracy (cf. for instance Latin *nauta* 'sailor', *pirata* 'pirate' and Swedish *människa* 'man' (in the sense of 'human being'), all feminine in gender, although the Latin words were certainly not used to refer to women and the Swedish word by no means indicates that Sweden has been or is a matriarchy).

In her analysis of the use of the Sissala particle *baa* (Section 5.2), Blass subsumes under 'temporal uses' the 'iterative', 'restitutive', and 'durative'. However, such uses are by most scholars described in terms of 'aspect' and/or 'action' ('Aktionsart'; cf. for example Bache, Basbøll & Lindberg (eds.) 1994:passim), and it is not entirely obvious why Blass thinks it better to interpret them as primarily temporal uses.

These are all minor objections, however. On the whole, Regina Blass's book can be recommended to anyone interested in DA on a more advanced level and in particular to students of discourse of an interpretive orientation.

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