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# Discourse, Consciousness, and Time

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## Discourse, Consciousness, and Time: The Flow and Displacement

### Speaking and Writing

Wallace Chafe (1994)

Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press

Pp. xiii+327

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Linguistics texts do not constitute a monolithic form of discourse. Some are highly technical formulations; their readers need to decipher them, pencil in hand, in order to follow the argument with the imagination and elegance of fiction and the simplicity, clarity, and professional delight in uncovering their meaning, one page at a time, eagerly anticipating further development from their own experience with languages and that of her students. Charles J. Fillmore and M.A.K. Halliday. Wallace Chafe in his latest book. *Discourse, Consciousness, and Time* does not come as a surprise. In his book-length treatment of meaning and the structure of language (1970). Its sources can be found in his strategies in the “pear stories” (1980) and on the differences between oral and written modes of communication. The title clearly states, the book is about the way our conscious awareness of reality and the interaction between face- to-face interaction and fictional writing. The very cover, whose provenance is from the painting by Thomas Cole and the poet William Cullen Bryant, perched on a rocky promontory above the

stream that gains its strength from the undulating heights in the distance and is flowing m  
Spirits” echoes many of the themes in this book, from the interplay of reality and imaginat  
observation and imagination in studying the intricacies of language use.

Just as the cover provides thematic unity through artistic means, the conceptual unity is en  
of the linguistic issues discussed by Chafe, such as new vs. given information, have been c  
moreover, consciousness itself has taken lately a prominent role in cognitive science, with  
And yet, the book under review marks the first time that this “very core of our existence” b  
language phenomena are approached and examined.

The flow of Chafe’s elegant argument is divided into three parts– a clear concession to edi  
summaries at the end, need no further structuring. The first part (chapters 1 through 4) int  
eloquently summarized as follows: “We are all blind, each of us touching his or her small p  
indeed” (p. 9). Alongside the problem, we find a major assumption, namely that “consciou  
and behavior” (p. 40). Chafe places consciousness at the very foundation of language use  
“constant” properties (e.g., focus, dynamic character, point of view, and so forth) and “var  
displacement, factuality vs. fictionality), as well as its flow and displacement, explains muc

Within conversational consciousness, the intonation unit– identified by such criteria as va  
contours–is the smallest unit of analysis. Several chapters are devoted to it in the second p  
sentence, but sometimes coinciding with one, the intonation unit represents the speaker’s  
uttered and is a stable memory unit. Central to its relation to consciousness is the idea of a  
required to access informtion by the speaker; thus, given and accessible information exac

The language phenomena examined in this part in some detail, on the basis of a corpus of  
others: the grammatical subject (the referent from which an intonation unit moves on) ar  
The latter states that in conervation subjects usually refer to given or accessible informati  
information resides, when present, in the predicate. An additional hypothesis, the “one ne  
intonation unit, only one independent item represents new information. Just as speakers  
intonation unit at a time, semiactively they hold more of a conversation, which becomes a  
These larger units, called “discourse topics,” are developed from the point of view of one  
with expectations, and are sustained either through interaction or narratively.

The hypotheses advanced and partially but most convincingly supported in these chapter  
Seneca language (the Iroquoian family), in an attempt to show those commonalities amon  
instance, the ability to activate only one idea per focus of consciousness may very well be  
ventures even farther afield, into music, to [-2-] suggest that both language and music “ar  
conscious experience” (p. 191). Both chapters, by necessity short, show the wider, human  
large amount of detailed work awaiting investigators within the conceptual framework im

the area that needs elaboration more than others, the one that this reviewer found tantalizingly discussed in part of the third section, entitled “Displacement” (chapters 15 through 24).

Displacement is certainly not the exclusive domain of written discourse. Chafe provides a detailed analysis of the immediate and displaced modes of talk. We are sent back to the Hudson River School camp about the stream right in front of them and maybe about the sources of the stream or about the forest. Their active consciousness alternates between two modes. Chafe introduces a very useful distinction between extroverted consciousness, directly affected by the environment, and “introverted” consciousness, which is not. Both are present in conversational language: the former has a stream-like quality, is rich in detail, and is centered on the deictic center from which space and time are represented; the latter is island-like and self-contained. The dichotomy between the “represented” and “representing” functions of consciousness is both providing the ideas that are represented and representing them; in writing, the extroverted consciousness is responsible for both activities, while the introverted consciousness is responsible for the ideas or remembered time.

The last chapters of the book dwell on the linguistic ways in which displaced immediacy is represented in first person narrator and the representation of speech and thought by others, to third person fiction, to the absent (the traditional omniscient narrator), and finally, to written non-fiction in many genres. From face-to-face verbal interaction and written non-fiction, the various kinds of expository writing find themselves at the opposite end from conversation: in their displaced immediacy, there is no acknowledged representing consciousness; moreover, there is no acknowledged reader and no audience was produced or received. These forms of writing are remote—both literally and figuratively—from the conversational flow, acquired without effort or reflection in childhood. Within Chafe’s continuum, we should understand better the difficulties college students have in learning to write.

The learning process becomes a miracle when the learners are functioning in a culture different from their own, with different conventions and underlying assumptions, as is the case of non-native speakers of English. For those of us who teach ESL writing (and not just writing) at the college level more immediately available than we so often take for granted, but also of the deceptively close links between the oral and written modes of language. At the level, from the perspective of the extroverted and introverted consciousness, one can create a more comprehensive and more enjoyably than by invoking textbook rules. But maybe the key to what holds for language teaching consists of its bringing forcefully to the fore the importance of the rich, spontaneous, occurring conversations, but also from the rich treasures of good fiction. For it is only from the study of the mysteries of language use will be uncovered, explained, and internalized.

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