ПЛОВДИВСКИ УНИВЕРСИТЕТ „ПАИСИЙ ХИЛЕНДАРСКИ“ – БЪЛГАРИЯ
НАУЧНИ ТРУДОВЕ, ТОМ 50, КН. 1, СБ. В, 2012 – ФИЛОЛОГИЯ,
PAISII HILENDARSKI UNIVERSITY OF PLOVDIV – BULGARIA
RESEARCH PAPERS, VOL. 50, BOOK 1, PART C, 2012 – LANGUAGES AND LITERATURE

ARE TEXT AND DISCOURSE STUDIES REALLY TURNING COGNITIVE?

Nelly Tincheva
Saint Kliment Ohridski University of Sofia

The cognitivization of text and discourse studies is generally admitted to be a fast and all-pervasive process. It seems safe to argue that nowadays almost every piece of research on text and discourse tags itself ‘cognitive’. However, the fact also makes one justified in asking which cognitive studies are really cognitive and which are just ‘dressed up’ to look the part? The present paper presents a personal viewpoint on whether text and discourse studies are really being ‘cognitivized’ or not.

Key words: cognitive, text, discourse, context

I. The Viewpoint

The present paper may (reasonably) be seen as not properly academic for being too personal and argumentative. Sparkling an argument, however, is seen as its main purpose. It is my conviction that from time to time discussing directions and challenging them could be as healthy for science as measuring analytical progress.

The paper was inspired by a long-term memory construct – a newspaper caricature from many years ago which has stuck in my mind and, for no obvious reason, keeps popping up on various occasions and in various contexts. The caricature depicted a conference hall and a cleaning lady being pushed to speak in the microphone, the lady energetically protesting. The expensively-suited executive pushing the lady persuaded her, ‘Just use the word *computer* in every sentence’… Yes, that would make all things alright. Obviously, times have changed since my childhood years – today, it seems fashionable to use the word *cognitive* in every sentence instead. And that is not only the case in the realm of psychology and linguistics.

Today, scientists discuss ‘the cognitive biases’ exposed by behavioral finance (e.g. Kaestner 2004). They analyze the proper uses of cost-benefit analysis in the prevention of ‘cognitive mistakes’ (e.g.

Sunstein 1999). There are courses on how to achieve 'cognitive infiltration of extremist groups'. At present, there even exists 'cognitive poetics' – a separate science which aims to start a trend and, finally – in my humble opinion – bridge the gap between literary and linguistic studies (e.g. Freeman 2005). I'm not commenting negatively on the quality or purposes of the studies in question – far from it! On the contrary, I choose to mention specifically those papers and strands as their quality and contributions have been generally attested. What I would only like to do is bring to attention some questions on which there seems to be shortage of clarification and to discuss some uncertainties about what mis-construals might be pre-determining the future of (mass) cognitivism.

Going back to the caricature story, one could hardly argue against the fact that today anything and everything seems readily 'tagged' *cognitive*, especially in linguistics. Probably, it is only my shortcomings and theoretical prejudices but I somehow cannot accept the idea that all things linked to human thinking should be simply swept up together under the 'cognitive' carpet.

II. The Reason(ing)

A first point to clarify is whether, from the present angle on linguistic analysis, going cognitive is really a must.

My personal 'cognitivization' began when I had to experience versions of Text Linguistic approaches in my University classes. In those times, I readily assimilated the notion that no true understanding of language can be attained, if linguistics keeps defining itself as the study of phonemes, morphemes, lexemes and sentences only. And I 'somehow' 'knew' Text linguistics could not provide major insights into what language is all about, if it keeps defining itself as the study of text grammars as, for example, Zellig Harris used to define it (e.g. 1952). Similarly, I 'felt' the analysis of the specificities of textual properties and phenomena as seen in e.g. Halliday and Hasan's research (most notably 1976 and 1985), would sooner or later crash into its own comfortable well-cushioned sign-and-no-brain semiotic boundaries. I grappled with the simple question of why any scientist (and lecturer) should try and amalgamate Hallidayan text studies and de Beaugrande and Dressler's notion of text as process (1981) into the same discipline, when they seemed to diverge so widely.

Other extremely simple questions also charged in plaguing, and, to my defense, or against my defenses, they were the kind of questions which my students keep hurling at me in every lecture I give on Halliday today:

What exactly is an ongoing process of semiotic choices, if not a mental activity? How precisely does a person manipulate and connect signs? How does one account for the process of 'assigning meanings', if one does not see it as brain activity?

Similarly, whenever I experienced an admiration for Ecco's semiotics, Searle's pragmatics, or the Birmingham school's insight into discourse structure, for instance, I would always be tormented by issues such as: fine, the sign is out there – functioning and all-systemic – floating somewhere in society, whatever society may actually be – but how exactly does that sign function through each member of society? And what system is a sign a part of so that the social sign of a kid raising noise in the playground can make me feel so hopeful and upbeat, while further away in the same city, the same sign tells a man he should grab a gun and shoot the kid? So, how is that sign perceived differently and for what reasons? Do you and your neighbor, who drinks and parties away into a stupor-like 'bliss' interpret the 'STOP' sign at the crossroads the same way? How do the differences of your interpretations of the 'STOP' sign reflect on your personal self-esteem, social status perceptions and emotions? (Truly, the examples above are quite radical. However, the point here is precisely to be analytically all-inclusive and, thus, to target even emotionally-charged, non-logical components and embrace them into the cognitive discussion.)

Later on in life, I would also go: 'Yes, Sinclair and Coulthard's basic conversation structure (1975) does seem capable of fitting all structural discursive possibilities. Discourse does seem to take place in the form of Initiation/ Response/ Follow-up (see Tsui 1994). But why? And why those three? And why three, for that matter? Why not pragmaticists' two-turn pairs? What's the deal with three-part structures, generally? Ready-steady-go? One-two-three? Father, son, and the Holy Ghost? Father-mother-kid? Why are three-part structures more stable and more functional than two-part ones? Why do so many primitive cultures make use of three-legged chairs? Are those cultures really primitive? Are not those chairs more stable and don't they last through the ages more successfully than, let's say, Thomas Eddison's six-legged chair that won't tip backwards?'

I could now keep piling the uncertainties and questions which then paved the creeping influence of cognitivization on the sleeper of a text linguist in me… But most important of all, one special topic – context – should be foregrounded as still standing out against the multitude of those questions. Context, moreover, is an issue which might aptly demonstrate why all text and discourse studies need to be cognitive. Most importantly,

as any bibliographical check will confirm, context is the focus of analysis of most present-day cognitive text and discourse studies.

III. A case in point: 'cognitivizing' context

What should be specified at the very outset here is that, in discussing 'context', I'm not discussing what context is, rather than what context most probably is. In other words, here I'm aiming to describe my personal cognitive construct of 'context'. And I will do so within the network of my models of my personal experiences along my personal knowledge-building processes which came to be, or happened to be, related to my mental construct of context… today. As of now, and here. My present-day cognitive construct of what 'context' is to me.

Generally, ever since the introduction of the notion by anthropologist Malinowski in 1923, scientists have occupied and pre-occupied themselves with determining how context should be perceived. Alternative proposals on which the best (meaning either exhaustive or invariant) list of parameters of the communicative situation, or 'context', have been in competition. The extensive research on the problem can be summed up to blend text-based parameters and communicative situation-based parameters, as the following examples reveal:

Lewis (1972, in Brown and Yule 1983: 40) uses a set of co-ordinates to explain how he views context (possible-world co-ordinate, time co-ordinate, place co-ordinate, speaker co-ordinate, audience co-ordinate, indicated object co-ordinate, previous discourse co-ordinate, assignment co-ordinate). Hymes, however, argues (1964) that the parameters necessary for one to understand context are participants, topic, setting, channel, code, message form, event. In brief, linguistic literature abounds in competing proposals on how to classify contextual parameters. And here, again, the plaguing questions start rolling: How exactly does one decide which list of parameters is better? On the basis of what precisely methodological or analytical requirements? How many lists and lists and lists of parameters can be provided? If one list is analytically more sound in principle, how do I incorporate in it the parts from another list that I need for my current piece of research?

Alternatively, context could be seen as a mental network used in text production and perception. It could be interpreted as an online-created situation-specific cognitive construct, which calls up previous knowledge structures, selects among them, and organizes the currently selected ones into a mental network modelling the textual situation which embraces all mental constructs currently co-activated.

Such an approach, has been most notably advocated in the works of van Dijk who broached the idea as early as 1977. Van Dijk then moved through a notion of context as a frame, or a 'model schema' (1997:5), which comprises categories such as Setting (Time, Place), Circumstances, Participants and Action (ibid.). At present, his work focuses on participants' social cognitive representations and cognitive preferences as part of the context (e.g. 1999, 2009). Questions here may also arise: Where do the participants' mental constructs of the communicative situation belong? Are they part of context, or is context part of them? Where does the 'model schema' belong? Should it be placed in scientific domains only, or does it belong to general cognitive phenomena? Is the context schema a true metaphor of how all people perceive a current situation, prior to their being taught that the notion of context exists? Is context actually a static model-like phenomenon, or is it dynamic and ever on-going? Moreover, as I have argued elsewhere (Tincheva 2007), context seems way more manageable and useful, if seen as an overlap between a Text World cognitive model (for a discussion of a Textual World see Werth 1999), a Discourse World cognitive model and a Real World cognitive model, none of which, it should be noted, should necessarily be seen as objective. To further aggravate matters, all those models can prove nothing but cognitive processes running in parallel through a person's mind in a particular situation.

A context, generally, is way more of a personal phenomenon than commonly expected. Truly, it can be generalized. It can be systematized. But that can only be achieved, if we take into consideration the fact that context will always be dependent on the mental constructs recently and previously activated in a particular human's mind. And all that mental modeling will always depend on the educational level and one's personal adequacies, and inadequacies.

To put it even more bluntly, the context of the 'STOP' sign which you experience, in contrast to your bohemian neighbour's experience, will be heavily dependent, alas, on things such as the brand and quality of the whiskey s/he drank throughout the night; the topics and register of conversation carried at the party s/he gave; whether s/he slept at all, etc. Six hours before the 'STOP' sign, bad alcohol would mean that a person's mind now might not even register the 'STOP' sign, or his/ her mind might perceive it as something other than a 'STOP' sign (Haven't we all experienced gestalt imaging as in, for example, when one sees an oil-soaked rag by the road and one 'thinks' it is a dog, only to understand later it is just a rag?). Similarly, if the conversation at the neighbour's party

involved topics such as car racing or a car racing movie, the whole network of related images in your neighbour's mind will be freshly activated and s/he might feel tempted to use the BREAK THE LAW mental structure and drive through the red lights. And why do I keep coming back to this car-crash example? Can the reason be the fact that at the present process of writing the TV news is blurting information on a real-life case precisely like the one discussed here? Context, thus, is not only way more individual; it is also way more occasionalistic than we'd like to admit. It is way more dynamic and difficult to model computationally than scientist would like to think.

What I would like to highlight with respect to such a discussion of context, however, is yet another of its aspects – namely the question of whether my deliberation on the context-related specificities around the 'STOP' sign above truly represents cognitive analysis. A discussion like that does have a lot to do with thinking and interpretations. It does pertain to social attitudes, power and dependencies. But is all that enough to make the analysis truly 'cognitive'?

True to fact, a huge amount of the 'cognitivization' of text and discourse research has morphed into context-related analyses of 'goals', 'intents', 'social plans', etc. At present, it can be argued, if one discusses social beliefs, then one is a cognitivist. If one works on cultural structures and how they reflect on linguistic expression, citing the human brain as the general source of all that patterning, then one is a cognitivist. If one analyzes gender-biased linguistic variables (to choose one of the multiple variables) and concludes that it is the human body which pre-conditions whatever is happening in communication, then one is a cognitivist. Explorations on social perception, mutual attraction, intergroup contact, the social situating and conditioning of cognitive representations, on social cognition as commonly shared cognitive representations – all they are termed 'cognitive'. But are they? Do they really connect and explain social realities through particular brain structures and mind processes? Do they provide systematic connections between particular brain structures and mind processes and the social/ linguistic phenomena being analyzed? Or do they relate their findings to general – and, dare I say, vague – terms such as 'social cognitive representations' and 'cognitive preferences'?

From the point of view adopted here, one may put a piece of pragmatic research in the finest of wraps, or give it the finest of semiotical tunings, but it will and can never be 'cognitive enough', if it doesn't relate to and stem from basic human brain principles and particular processes. Admittedly, all scientists, who deal with variables, attitudes, purposes, etc.

do describe real-world communicative angles. They do deal with corpuses, i.e. they work with actual and not-necessarily standard data. They do not analyze well-formed, grammatical uses only. That is in terms of object of linguistic investigation. In terms of linguistic methodology, such studies do go descriptive and analytical all the way. No prescriptions. Truly. And they, truly, classify uses according to participants' communicative purposes. But how can such a broad-stroke approach to 'mental structures' in general be accepted as informative, if it doesn't also tell us what mental phenomena *specifically* pertain to the textual or discursive phenomenon in question? How can such research findings be trusted, if they do not prove statistically that the mental phenomenon in question is more-than-one person-specific (i.e. not specific to the researcher's mind exclusively)?

As far as the issue of how exactly to relate particular cognitive mechanisms and brain structures to textual and discursive uses is concerned, one finds oneself forced to admit that matters are further aggravated by questions stemming from ex-generativist trends. First of all, the questions still remain of how and why perceptions of language as an autonomous system/ organ in the brain are termed 'cognitive'? Does that mean that all studies which have anything to do with human thinking processes are really 'cognitive'? Then, what human science is *not* cognitive? What couldn't be related – ultimately – to a human brain? What could not be perceived as a product of or a comment on human thought? Does that mean that, for example, a house, which is undeniably a product of an architect's mind, should be called a 'cognitive house'? That house by necessity also results from repetitive bodily actions of construction workers – actions which are in themselves governed by brain potentials and mind operations. Is that another reason for keeping 'a cognitive house' as a term?

Questions of the kind could roll on for pages and pages ahead. And, truly, the main reason for this paper was to pile questions which I have personally found no resolution to as well as questions that frequently prove to be hurdles to scientists and students. The major premise sustained here, however, is that the cognitivization of text and discourse may be the right way to pave but what is happening at present on a grand scale may prove to be happening against the cognitive ways.

In line with a supposition like that, it should be noted that nothing I discussed in this paper has been actually associated with specific mental structures and activities. I did discuss context as a mental network, but I never specified what specific cognitive mechanisms it is relatable to. I did criticize some studies on language and text, but I never really pinpointed

and explained their deficiencies in terms of brain anatomy and functioning. Bearing that in mind, I would find it fully justifiable if anyone asks, 'Is this paper actually cognitive?'

IV. A final note

By way of final words, it should be mentioned again that the purpose of the present paper was to bring up questions – as general and as provocative as possible. The paper was not meant to launch personal attacks. It was only intended as a text that might raise a discussion (and, perhaps, some eyebrows).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Brown, Yule 1983: Brown, G., G. Yule. *Discourse Analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.

De Beaugrande, Dressler 1981: Beaugrande, R., W. Dressler. *Introduction to Text Linguistics*. London: Longman, 1981.

Freeman 2005: Freeman, M. Poetry as Power: The Dynamics of Cognitive Poetics as a Scientific and Literary Paradigm. // *Cognition and literary interpretation in practice*. (eds.) Veivo, H., B. Pettersson, M. Polvinen. Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 2005, 31 – 57.

Kaestner 2004: Kaestner, M. *Cognitive Biases and their Implications for Price Formation on Financial Markets*. PhD Thesis, Montpellier University – Euronext-AFFI Award 2004 for the best Ph.D thesis in Finance.

Malinowski 1923: Malinowski, B. The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Languages. // (eds.) Ogden, C. K., I. Richards. *The Meaning of Meaning.* New York: Harcourt Brace, 1923.

Halliday, Hasan 1985: Halliday, M. A. K., R. Hasan. *Language, Context, and Text: Aspects of Language in a Social-semiotic Perspective*. Melbourne: Deakin University Press, 1985.

Halliday, Hasan 1976: Halliday, M. A. K., R. Hasan. *Cohesion in English*. London: Longman, 1976.

Harris 1952: Harris, Z. Discourse Analysis. *Language* 28:1, 1952, 1 – 30.

Hymes 1964: Hymes, D. *Toward ethnographies of communicative events*. Harmondsmith: Penguin Books, 1964.

Sinclair 1975: Sinclair, J., M. Coulthard. *Towards an Analysis of Discourse*. Oxford University Press, 1975.

Sunstein 1999: Sunstein, C. *Cognition and Cost-Benefit Analysis*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999.

Online available: http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=186669

Tincheva 2007: Tincheva, N. Contexts, Text Worlds and Discourse Worlds. // *За човека и езика.* (ed.) Bagasheva, A. Sofia: Sofia University Press, 2007, 330 – 340.

Tsui 1994: Tsui, A. *English Conversation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994.

Van Dijk 2012: Van Dijk, T.A. Discourse and Knowledge. // *Handbook of Discourse Analysis*. (eds.) Gee, J., M. Handford. London: Routledge, 2012, 587 – 603.

Van Dijk 2009: Van Dijk, T.A. Critical Discourse Studies: A Sociocognitive Approach. // *Methods of critical discourse analysis* (eds.) Wodak, R., M. Meyer. London: Sage, 2009, 62 – 85.

Van Dijk 1999: Van Dijk, T.A. Context and Experience Models in Discourse Processing. // *The construction of mental representations during reading*. (eds.) van Oostendorp, H., S. Goldman. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1999, 123 – 148.

Van Dijk 1997: Van Dijk, T.A. Cognitive Context Models and Discourse. // *Language Structure, Discourse and the Access to Consciousness*. (ed.) M. Stamenow. Amsterdam: Benjamins, 1997, 189 – 226.

Van Dijk 1977: Van Dijk, T.A. Context and Cognition: Knowledge frames and speech act comprehension. *Journal of Pragmatics* 1: 3, 1977, 211 – 231.

Werth 1999: Werth, P. *Text Worlds: Representing Conceptual Space in Discourse*. London: Longman, 1999.