DISCOURSE STRUCTURE

The moment a conversation is started, whatever is said is determining condition for what, in any reasonable expectation, may follow. What you say raises the threshold against most of the language of your companion, and leaves only a limited opening for a certain likely range of responses.

<div align="right">(J.R. Firth, 1935)</div>

- Conversation and written text consist of ordered strings of utterances/sentences. Connected discourse is clearly not random, but coherent.

- Conversationalists are aware that not anything can follow anything, Discourse is structured.

- The concept of structure is related to *well-formedness* (the possibility of distinguishing coherent and incoherent sequences of discourse) and *predictability* (conversationalists can predict what other speakers are likely to say, because there are constraints on linear sequence)

Examples

A: Hello!

B: Hello. Is Jim there? (*well-formed*)

*A: *Yes, I can*

  B: *Can you see into the future?*

*Customer : *Good morning. Do you have anything to treat complete lost of voice?*

Shopkeeper: *Good morning, Sir. And what can I do for you?*

(I approach a stranger in the street)

Excuse me. My name's Mike Stubbs. Can you tell me the way to the station?

*Today we have a discussion of vasectomy, and the announcement of the winner of the do-it-yourself competition. (*ill-formed*)

A. Exchange Structure

Exchange: the minimal unit of interactive discourse

Ex: teacher-pupil talk

Teacher	: *initiation*	e.g. *What's the capital of France?*
Pupil	: *response*	*Paris*
Teacher	: *feedback*	*Right*
T	:	*And Germany?*
P	:	*Bonn*
T	:	*Good*

Doctor-patient talk

Doctor	: *initiation*	e.g. *You've only had one attack?*
Patient	: *response*	*Well, as far as I know*
Doctor	: *follow-up*	*Yeah*

B. Narrative Structure

Labov (1972) defines a minimal narrative as a sequence of two clauses which are temporally ordered: a change in their sequence results in a change in the sequence of the narrative events.

Ex: *I hit John and John hit me.*

 John hit me and I hit John.

Assumption: a different person started the fight in each case.

What about the structure of stories?