

## BOOK REVIEW

**PILAR ALONSO. *A MULTI-DIMENSIONAL APPROACH TO DISCOURSE COHERENCE: FROM STANDARDNESS TO CREATIVITY*. BERN: PETER LANG, 2014**

*Amanda Ellen Gerke*

*University of Salamanca*

*A Multi-dimensional Approach to Discourse Coherence: From Standardness to Creativity* (henceforth MADC) presents an innovative and all-inclusive approach to the subject of discourse coherence with the aim of contributing to the understanding of how the element is created, maintained, and reconstructed by participants via the interrelationship between the structural and cognitive components of coherence. This innovative approach takes a deep look at levels of discourse meaning through the examination and development of the understanding of conceptual frameworks which work through an interactive relevancy to both the producers and receivers of the discourse and integrates multiple approaches that are mutually relevant to analytical aims. The view is that discourse coherence is a complex notion that acts under a strong set of criterion and that it is what makes the discourse relevant to the situation of occurrence, and is what regulates how the situation impacts the actual meaning and function of the discourse. Alonso's claim is that structural coherence is producer-oriented and is a property of texts, while cognitive coherence is subject to personal and cultural factors as it lies in the minds of the producer and receiver, and that it is imperative to combine a variety of approaches "in order to address issues such as cohesion, local and global relations, topicalisation, thematisation, the recovering of the global meaning, and the construction of coherent, prototypical and peripheral, mental models" (17).

While building upon classic theories, Alonso integrates concepts and treatments as to provide an in-depth analysis of the multiplex of interactive facets that achieve coherence at all levels of communication. MADC draws attention to the process of production and reception, as well as the formal and functional elements of texts,

demonstrating that cognition is the missing link and the unifying factor that leads to a more full and integrated understanding of discourse meaning. Through an in-depth examination of conceptual models and cognitive structures, Alonso points to the mental mechanisms that enable a discourse to become understandable and meaningful; she provides a complimentary set of theories that provide a comprehensive description of the internal mental process that occurs in the mind of the participants at the moment in which the discourse is interpreted. MADC presents a bi-level bridge that lays out the theoretical dimensions of the approach and that moves them forward and together toward notions dealing with contextual elements, cultural factors, participants' goals and intentions and mental model construction. Alonso's theoretical insights are all illustrated with specific research results from a diverse range of texts and data including media discourse, case studies on summary writing, and narrative discourse. All examples and data are taken from real, non-constructed discourse as units of communication as coherence rises as a central notion which facilitates understanding; text and discourse are units of communication as they are viewed as processes, and not products, which directly reflect the cognitive conditions within participant interaction. MADC places discourse analysis and cognitive linguistics at the center of research activity, and pinpoints that the combination of findings is what leads to the redirection of the study of coherence.

The book is divided into two sections which concentrate on the notions of structural coherence and cognitive coherence respectively with special emphasis on that in terms of coherence, the two are never unrelated. Chapter one presents a brief discussion on the pioneering studies and theories of discourse analysis and text linguistics that serve as a building block and connector to Alonso's work. The chapter focuses on the origins of studies on text and discourse beginning with the first-generation studies and addressing the move from the formal and functional study of language towards a more modern approach that recognizes text and discourse studies as "descriptive, dynamic and empirical, based on real data, with a semantico-pragmatic and cognitive orientation, and an interest in text participants both at the stage of production and interpretation" (216). Alonso ties these theories together to show that the exploitation of this broad theoretical background is what leads to the consideration that coherence is a fundamental component in all discourse activities and builds a foundation for which her present approach to coherence leads off from.

Chapter two focuses on coherence and discourse structure by discussing meaning relations, local and global levels of communicative units, aspects of global coherence and a discussion and criticism of the approaches to notions such as theme and "rheme" and interconnects notions of theme, topic, and comment. The proposal is that the combination of elements will not only allow for a "move from the local to the global levels of discourse meaning; it will also permit to identify the structural components of discourse coherence" (70). In this chapter, Alonso focuses on the microstructural levels and discourse organization including a discussion on processes

and occurrences according to chronology of presentations, generalization, conceptual situations and causal arrangements of events or actions. The advantages and disadvantages of the process are addressed through the analysis of multiple examples of low complexity. As a result, Alonso reconsiders Halliday's functional theories of thematisation and builds on Brown and Yule's theoretical framework that distinguishes between theme and topic pinpointing that another element, comment, is essential in dealing with the totality of the information contained in the discourse.

Chapter three moves towards coherence and discourse topic construction, and takes on a more advanced elaboration of the concepts built in chapter two by treating longer and more involved media related and creative texts. The structural analysis of various comment articles seek to show formal strategies that are at the base of topic chain creation and that contribute to the regulation and construction strategies within the global discourse topics. Concentration is placed on topic, theme and comment and the role in global meaning projection at the discourse level. Here, Alonso focuses on topic continuity and how it is achieved in complex units of discourse through the notion of "aboutness" and the syntactic and pragmatic distribution of old and new information.

Chapter four brings together findings in the preceding two chapters that indicates that the implicitness of the coherent discourse construct is a cognitive process and points the research more explicitly in that direction as a transition to the second part of the book. Meaning relations and global topic construction are key elements in the achievement of coherence for both the producer and the receiver, and are what lead to the successful operation of communication goals. Here, Alonso identifies certain cognitive structures and states that mental models are empty cognitive structures created in the course of discourse comprehension; language users employ other resources to draw their own meaning conclusions when discourses do not correspond with any prototypical situation.

Chapter five is the first chapter in the second part of the book which shifts to the development of cognitive coherence. The chapter introduces the theoretical framework that is later built upon to be used in the second part of the study. The chapter highlights key factors in cognitive linguistics including notions of prototype and the conception of mental models and special attention is given to frame semantics and conceptual integration. This chapter combines the structural moves described in the first part of the book with a new method that integrates the cognitive aspects which contribute to the description and acceptance of a given discourse as a coherent whole and include three linguistic theories of cognition: frame semantics, cognitive semantics, and theory of conceptual integration. This chapter outlines these theories as a base for analysis with the emphasis that "within this theoretical field, language is considered a door to the investigation of the workings of the mind" (223).

Chapter six deals with the lexical conceptual frame approach to discourse coherence, and covers conceptualizing lexical collocation, the cognitive role of lexical collocation, and elaborative collocation as context-framed conceptual integration, and is presented through the analysis of a range of media discourse. Alonso develops an approach that reconsiders Halliday and Hasan's distinctions between reiteration and collocation as lexical cohesive items and centers on cohesive ties as meaning-relation builders and explores the function of lexical cohesive networks in the construction of discourse coherence. The mental-oriented theoretical viewpoint presented in this chapter builds further on the assertion that a solid interaction between cognitive lexical frames, lexical collocation, and discourse continuity and coherence exists and when integrated, establishes global discourse coherence. Alonso concludes that co-existing and co-occurring elements both activate frameworks of meaning, but also create new realities and perspectives due to the culturally dependent contributions to the construction of mental and social models.

Chapter seven applies Alonso's new approach to John Updike's short story "The Wallet" in which the role of emotions are shown to play a key part in the understanding of the meaning relations underlying the internal and external coherence levels of the protagonist and other characters. The analysis presents a set of mental space configurations representing the reader's mental model that, as Alonso states, "permits a cognitive reinterpretation of the story from a viewpoint which is not available in the input when considered factually and literally" (185). The analysis in this chapter adds in the internal subjective element of cognition to the external and shared aspects of social cognition which in turn reveals a practical need to view coherence as a multi-faceted system of structural and cognitive relations in which values (social and personal) interact that lead to a reorganization of socially shared standard values and the consequential effects of the reorganization.

The final chapter of this book is a culminating chapter that completes the integration of all approaches described throughout the book by addressing the final integral factor of coherence construction and responses from the receivers. This chapter claims that the interface between structural and cognitive coherence "opens ways for creative non-standard versions of coherence which may develop networks of conceptual relations by other means, thus defying all frames of formal and logical expectations" (209). Alonso completes her aims by providing evidence, through summary writing of English students, that receivers fill a text with meaning that they do not fully understand, by means of building a coherent mental model of the information provided overruling other comprehension tactics and other problems encountered. The chapter concludes that the broad range of interacting constituents provides evidence that coherence is a multidimensional event that includes interaction with the structural and cognitive, internal and external, implicit and explicit components of the discourse.

MADC is a comprehensive study that integrates traditional and contemporary trends of discourse analysis which, through integration and innovation, broadens perspectives on current theories and applications surrounding notions of text and discourse coherence. MADC concisely establishes a theoretical base and interweaves a multitude of approaches, emphasizing the need to focus analyses on authentic linguistic material in a way that broadens the perspectives on the topic and pinpoints the need to understand discourse coherence as a multi-dimensional and complex discourse event.

While at first it seems that the beginning chapter sections cut short and lack transition, when continuing along in the first chapters, the reader quickly appreciates the conciseness of the writing and becomes aware that Alonso's minimalist approach in the beginning chapters rapidly gains momentum and builds an appropriate and well-founded first step towards fulfilling research goals and supporting the claims of the book. Alonso takes a considerate yet authoritative stance on her criticism of traditional theories and applications and backs up all criticism and innovative insight with extensive research results. Each chapter fully builds upon the next with an organized and linear movement whose procedural process is culminated in the ending chapters with no loose ends. The book is highly readable, and her visual aids, analyses samples, and figures are easy to follow. MADC is an all-inclusive, thorough examination of discourse coherence which argues for, and completes the innovation of new treatments to the concept and holds important implications in the fields of discourse analysis, cognitive linguistics, language pedagogy, and is informative to areas such as socio-linguistics, pragmatics, and semantics. The layout of the book, the visual aids, the array of analyses throughout the study, along with Alonso's systematic development of theory and application, make for a wide readership that include students, researchers, and analysts from a broad range of disciplines.

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Author's contact: [aegerke@gmail.com](mailto:aegerke@gmail.com)