

TALKING ABOUT TALK*

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1. Introduction

The object of linguistic research has long been those aspects of the speaker's production (or what is intuited to be the ideal speaker's production) which express 'content' - such aspects as the topic, the particular events/actions/states/processes being described, the social and physical background to these and the participants involved in them, and the attitudes of the speaker to what he is talking about and to the addressee. All these aspects relate to 'things' - events, experiences, concepts, individuals etc. in the extralinguistic or extratextual world. They are what the addresser "wants to say", that is, in the sense, when quoting a speaker, we say 'so-and-so said', what Leech calls the 'content mode of mention' (1980:62). This includes any implications aroused by what has been uttered. Such is 'talk'.

But 'what is said' in the content mode is to a great extent interpreted in the light of 'what is said' in the expression mode. In other words, the speaker tries to make certain that as far as possible what he says is interpreted in the way he intends. To achieve this end, he makes use of various linguistic and paralinguistic devices. Through the use of these, he indicates such aspects of his message¹ as: how the various parts of the content are linked to and depend on each other; what he is going to say next; what he has said previously; his assumptions about the addressee's state of knowledge; his acknowledgments of his relation with the addressee, and so on;

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that a speaker or writer can scarcely avoid talking about his discourse. An extended piece of discourse without metacommunication would be extremely difficult to produce. This means that the doctor, gardener or architect, while talking about their various topics of interest, will at the same time talk about the discourse they are producing. This relationship can be represented as follows:

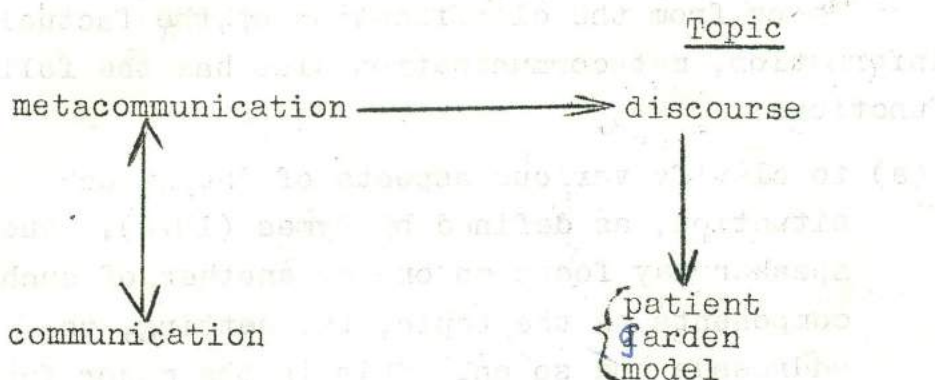


Fig. 1. Relationship between communication and metacommunication

Figure 1 shows that both the communication and the metacommunication have their 'aboutness' and they also, of course, have their separate expression. Moreover, just as the doctor may use specialised linguistic forms to talk about his patient, or the gardener about his borders, so too the language of metacommunication is specialised. In order to make clear the nature of this language, I shall first offer a consideration of metacommunication generally, before examining a specific type of metacommunication, that pertaining to discourse relations.

2.1. General

It is useful to consider metacommunication both from a functional and from a formal point of view. ~~First~~ First functionally. Just as communication is

functional, intended by the speaker to make the addressee aware of that which he was previously unaware of, so too does metacommunication have a function. It enables the speaker to make explicit his intentions as to how his communication is to be interpreted. But since communication itself is multi-faceted, as I have indicated, the speaker may want to 'metacommunicate' on any of several aspects of his communication.

Apart from the clarification of the factual information, metacommunication also has the following functions:

- (a) to clarify various aspects of the speech situation, as defined by Hymes (1972). The speaker may focus on one or another of such components as the topic, the setting, the addressee and so on. This is the major function of metacommunication, as it covers most of the
- (b) to make explicit the attitudes of the speaker to both the addressee and the various dimensions of his topic. Here the focus is on interpersonal relations, as defined by Halliday (1973). The expression of attitudes itself is not a metacommunicative function, but an announcement that an attitude is about to be expressed, or a comparison of attitudes, is metacommunicative. Similarly, it is not the actual expression of the relations between the speaker and the addressee which are metacommunicative, but the negotiation and establishment of these relations.

- (c) to indicate to the addressee how the discourse is organised, in terms of relationships between its various parts, the introduction and ending of sub-topics, the highlighting of important and crucial points, and so on. This function of metacommunication is very important in the presentation of the content-message; it allows the speaker to indicate the structure of his discourse, and at the same time provides some of the means of holding the discourse together.
- (d) to make explicit the illocutionary and perlocutionary intentions of the speaker, in so far as this is necessary. The illocutionary and perlocutionary intentions of the speaker may also be expressed in the content-message.

These are the major functions of metacommunication, and together they make possible an interpretation by the addressee which approximates as closely as possible the speaker's intention.

Formally, we are dealing with specific signals which perform the function of indicating how the speaker's intentions are to be interpreted, that is, the realisation of metacommunication. For these, I shall use the term 'metacommunicative markers'.³ The word 'marker' implies overtness. All metacommunicative markers are overt, but they differ in their degree of explicitness. The most explicit type of metacommunicative marker is exemplified by:

indication of importance:

1) One of the major points is

indication of rephrasing:

2) Let me put it this way

3) More accurately, I would say

indication of attitude:

5.

4) My own view is that
indication of illocutionary force:

5) This is not to suggest that

6) The short answer is that

Other types of metacommunicative marker are less explicit. Those exemplified above have no other function apart from the metacommunicative one. Others have only a marginal metacommunicative status, their central functions being in grammar and semantics. Such are markers like intonation and word order, which undoubtedly play a role in clarifying the speaker's attitude to what he says and the illocutionary force of his utterances.

The various linguistic and non-linguistic devices which can be used with a metacommunicative function are set out in Table 1. It will be obvious from the table that metacommunicative markers cover a wide range of expressions and categories. For the purposes of this paper, I shall focus on the type exemplified by (1) - (6) above, which I shall call metacommunicative comments (henceforth metacomment or MC). MCs have several characteristics which distinguish them from other markers, and which I shall examine in the next section. For the moment I want to give an idea of the wide range of communicative aspects that MCs can be used to focus on. Such aspects include those of the communication situation. A brief look at such MCs will show, first, the wide range of functions that MCs have and, second, why existing terms like 'metalinguistic' and 'metareference' are inadequate for the description of all devices which indicate 'how what the speaker is saying is to be taken' (Brown and Yule 1983:132).

METACOMMUNICATIVE MARKERS

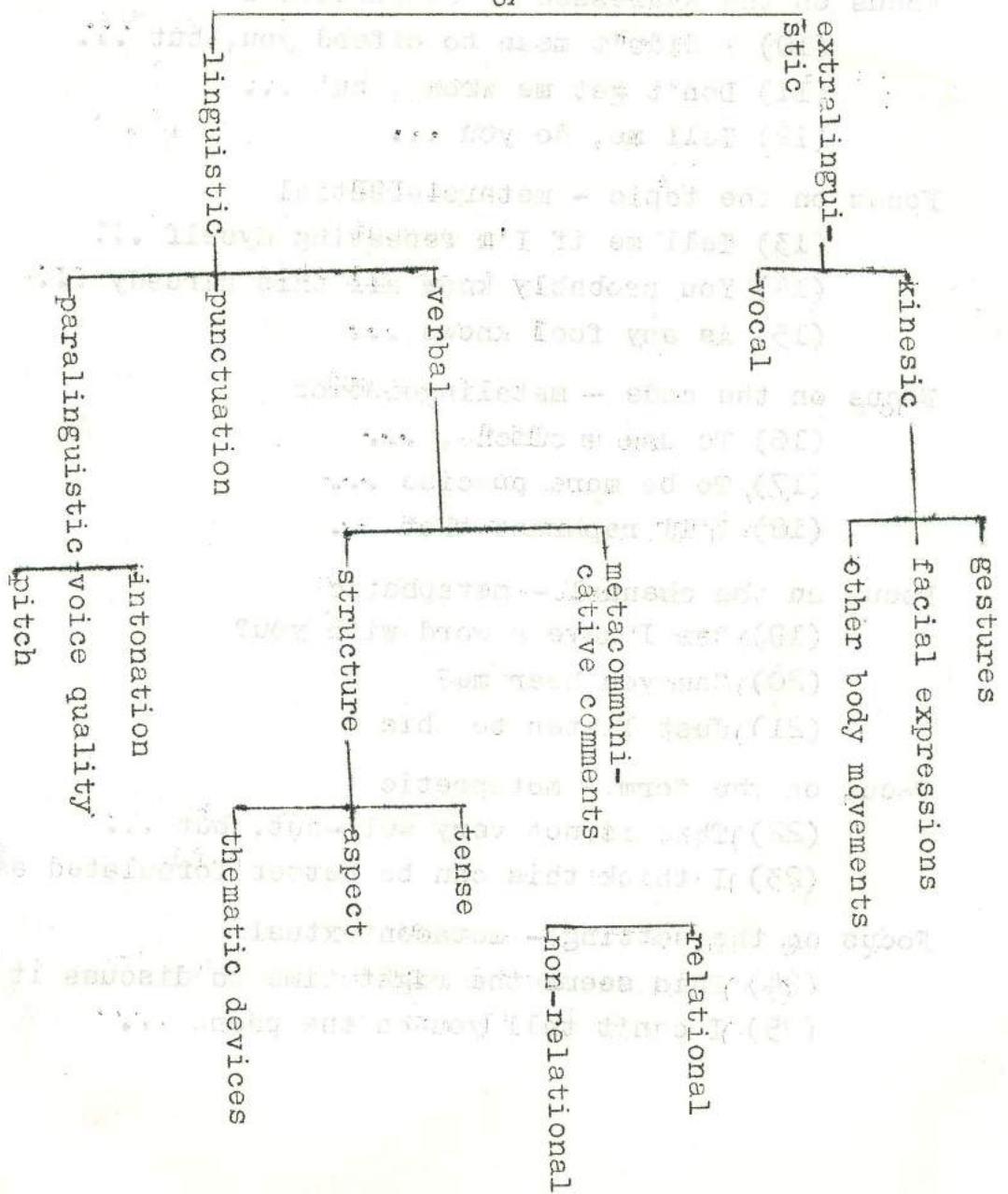


Table 1: Devices which may be used with metacommunicative function

Following Hymes (1972:37-8), I assume that the metacommunicative function may focus on each one of the components which make up the speech event. The speaker may use various types of MCs to comment on each separate component of the speech event. In other words, we can expect MCs to focus on the addresser, on the code, on the topic, and so on. For example:

Focus on the addresser - metaexpressive

- (7) This is just a feeling I have, but ...
- (8) I feel strongly that ...
- (9) It is interesting to note that ...

Focus on the addressee - metadirective

- (10) I didn't mean to offend you, but ...
- (11) Don't get me wrong, but ...
- (12) Tell me, do you ...

Focus on the topic - metareferential

- (13) Tell me if I'm repeating myself ...
- (14) You probably know all this already ...
- (15) As any fool knows ...

Focus on the code - metalinguistics

- (16) To use a cliché, ...
- (17) To be more precise ...
- (18) I'll rephrase that ...

Focus on the channel - metaphatic

- (19) Can I have a word with you?
- (20) Can you hear me?
- (21) Just listen to this

Focus on the form - metapoetic

- (22) This is not very well-put, but ...
- (23) I think this can be better formulated as, 11.

Focus on the setting - metacontextual

- (24) This seems the right time to discuss it ...
- (25) I can't tell you on the phone ...

It is clear from these examples that 'metalinguistic' and 'metareferential' MCs constitute only two categories within a great variety of metacommunicative functions. Such terms cannot therefore be used to apply to all possible functions of metacommunicative comments. It is worth noting, however, that there may be some overlap in the MCs for different components, as for instance between code and form. Example (9) too is ambiguous as to whether it expresses the interest of the speaker, or the interest to the hearer, or the interestingness of the topic.

2.2. Relational

A specific type of metacommunicative comment is that included within the organisation function above. Knowing how one segment of a particular discourse is related to another segment is part of knowing how that discourse is structured, since bits of the discourse are connected not only linearly, but also hierarchically. The parts of a piece of discourse are always assumed by the addressee to be connected, whether or not metacommunication is brought into effect. However, the type of connection that the speaker wants to be understood is most clearly indicated through metacommunication. The relational functions of metacommunication, therefore, involve the indication of various types or relations, and in some cases, within the types, the indication of sub-types.

Formally, the specific signals indicating a relation between one piece of discourse and another (relational metacommunications, or RMCs) are exemplified in:

- (25) I am not attacking committed theatre.
Berrie Keefe's Sus, to take one example,
was a brilliantly impassioned attack on
the radical bias of the "SUS" laws⁴.

- (27) Man is an organism; more specifically he is an animal. He is undoubtedly a remarkable, and in many ways a unique animal. Nevertheless, he resembles other animals in bodily structure and function.
- (28) It was at the level of scale that African manufacturers had not made breakthrough. That is to say, the cotton looms were small, the iron smelters were small, the pottery was turned slowly by hand and not on a wheel etc.
- (29) The British had not conceived of a 'West African solution' - power relinquished to an African parliament - in Tanganyika. TANU, therefore, had to fight to make respectable the notion of an independent government dominated by Africans.

The examples provided in (7) to (25) do not include any RMCs, and it is pertinent to ask if relational metacommunication has any place in Hymes' framework of speech functions. It is not easy to see which components of the speech situation discourse relations can be attached to. Some of the components, specifically the addresser, the addressee and the setting are different from the others in that once the speech event is over, they are erased from the record of the speech event, the text, unless they are specifically mentioned. The other components, however, continue to be part of the text: the topic, the message form, the channel and the code are always available to any analyst who might want to examine the text; they do not have to be guessed at or imagined. From this distinction, relations, and their metacommunication, belong more naturally to the 'textual' components. Whatever it is that the speaker does in the production of discourse, the relations that he has established continue to have expression in the text. The question is:

which one of the components? I would suggest the message form: this relates to the expression of the message, and the indication of the way in which the various parts of the message are related must also be part of this expression. For instance, the arrangement of lines and verses in poetry is one aspect of the message form; such lines and spaces between verses also express how the different parts of the poem are related to each other. RMCs are more explicit, but they perform a similar function.

I have mentioned above that MCs have certain properties which are crucial to their proper definition and analysis. All MCs have these properties, but I shall consider them only in relation to RMCs.

(a) Non-contentness

MCs can be said to be non-contentful because they do not contribute anything to the propositional content of the discourse.⁵ Meyer (1975) holds this view, claiming MCs to be non-content, simply 'signalling' relations and organization. According to this view then, the RMC is seen to link propositions, or sentences, or illocutionary acts (depending on the descriptive framework adopted) in the following way:

proposition ₁	MC	proposition ₂
sentence ₁	MC	sentence ₂
illocutionary act ₁	MC	illocutionary act ₂

Whatever elements RMCs are postulated to link, they do not form part of what they link, and they themselves are not interpreted in terms of propositional content. This position is partly motivated by the apparent lack of denotation in RMCs. For example, Arapoff (1968:246) suggests RMCs have no denotative meaning, although they may have connotative meaning, which they acquire

from their regular association with particular expressions and their occurrence in particular positions. Lexical items which have denotative meaning are, according to Lyons, related to 'persons, things, places, properties, processes and activities external to the language system' (1977:207). One problem is that 'denotation' is defined in different ways by different people but, if Lyons' definition is adopted, then the phrase 'external to the language system' is crucial. It is difficult to see how one can extend expressions like moreover, indeed, so, on the contrary, on the other hand and dozens like them to anything in the external world. On the other hand, there are expressions such as the second point is, the reason being, as a result, which can be said to be denotative. However, the denotation in such expressions, when functioning metacommunicatively, is not to things, objects etc. Outside the language system, but to aspects of the discourse itself. For instance, the reason does not necessarily have to exist independently of the discourse, but rather in the on-going argument within the discourse. It may relate only to the 'internal world' of the discourse. In this sense, it may be possible to say that an RMC 'denotes' a discourse relation. The difference between the denotation of RMCs and that of other lexemes can be pictured thus:

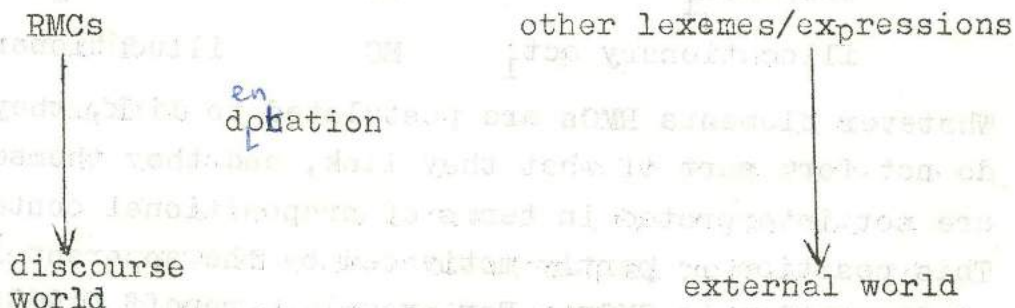


Fig. 2: Denotation of RMCs

(b) Optionality

RMCs are often optional. While the speaker cannot dispense with the other types of markers, he is not always obliged to use RMCs. This optionality operates at the planning stage of discourse. In other words, when formulating what he should say in a particular context, the speaker makes the choice, among others, of whether to make explicit, through the use of RMCs, the nature of the connection between parts of the discourse, or simply to juxtapose the two parts and leave the nature of the relationship implicit. For instance, in:

(30) The road was icy. The car skidded.

(31) The latter could not learn because the nerve cells were not fully grown.

The former has all the functional nerve cells but lacks the cortical links which can only be formed through experience.

the two parts can alternatively be linked by RMCs, such as therefore, on the other hand, respectively. These would have the effect of making the relationships between the parts explicit, and so causing the reader to arrive more certainly at the intended relation. However, given the force of context,

the natural effort of hearers and readers alike is to attribute relevance and coherence to the text they encounter until they are forced not to. (Brown and Yule 1983:66)

The optionality of RMCs seems a fact accepted by most writers. I have noted Meyer's position above. Beekman (1970) and Callow (1970) also hold the view that propositions may be linked by RMCs or not - the relationship is understood equally well. Winter (1971) notes that 80 per cent of relationships are left implicit in scientific texts. Poutsma states that 'connection may be

established by mere juxtaposition' (1929:590). There thus seems to be agreement that RMCs can often be left out without ill effect. However, this leaves open the question of whether the effect of using an RMC is the same as that of leaving it out. On this point, Arapoff (1968) demonstrates that 'sentence connectors' sometimes determine the logical relationship between two sentences, and not the other way round. One connector may arouse one set of 'suppositions' while another connector arouses a different set, so that the same two sentences can be used to express different relationships. Arapoff supplies the following example:

- 32a) It rained, therefore the yard got flooded⁶.
- b) at least
- c) in addition

In each of these, the connection used causes the hearer to build up different 'suppositions'. These connectors involve logical relationships. Others may specify the extent to which the information in the first part is applicable, or is true.

(33) ... considerable efforts were made to maintain friendly relations. In particular, neighbouring countries were assured that the adoption of more radical policies ...

(34) Everybody acknowledged his personal charm, the modesty and shyness which he displayed in private, yet in public he was depicted as a wild-eyed ranter, a man who perhaps did not realise the vicious effect of his own tongue or pen.

In these examples, if the RMCs are deleted, various implications are lost: for (33), that the assurances given were the main sort of efforts; and for (34) that his public character is surprising in view of his private one. I conclude therefore that in some cases the presence or absence of RMCs can cause differences in interpretation. Although the propositional content may not be affected, the overall message may be coloured with particular implicatures.

Having said that, I should stress that optionality is not the same thing as deletability. Optionality is relevant at the planning stage - if the speaker chooses not to use an RMC, he will have to use other means - lexical, grammatical - in order to achieve approximately the same effect. Deletability, on the other hand, applies to the text as already produced. It would be relevant in processes such as paraphrasing, simplification, editing, processes which are carried out for specific purposes. In such a situation, the issue needs to be approached from a different perspective: if an RMC used for a particular relation is removed, what would be the effect? The answer has to be considered from three levels, since various RMCs have different syntactic and semantic characteristics. In relation to this, consider the following examples:

(35a) Although salivating to the sound of a bell is an unnatural response it is of definite advantage to the organism so long as the natural stimulus follows.

b) Salivating to the sound of a bell is an unnatural response it is of definite advantage to the organism so long as the natural stimulus follows.

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(36a) The translation of an advanced book in physics must be done by someone who is bilingual in the international language and in the vernacular, and is also a competent physicist. Very few such people exist, and where they do exist their services are urgently required for other jobs.

b) ... Very few such people exist, where they do exist their services are urgently required for other jobs.

(37a) Europeans were also able to unload on the African continent goods which had become unsaleable in Europe. Thus, items like old sheets, cast-off uniforms, technologically outdated firearms, and lots of odds and ends found guaranteed markets in Africa.

b) Europeans were also able to unload on the African continent goods which had become unsaleable in Europe. Items like old sheets, cast-off uniforms, technologically outdated firearms, and lots of odds and ends found guaranteed markets in Africa.

(38a) Man is an organism; more specifically he is an animal. He is undoubtedly a remarkable, and in many ways a unique, animal. Nevertheless he resembles other animals in bodily structure and functions.

b) ... He is undoubtedly a remarkable, and in many ways a unique, animal. Resembles other animals in bodily structure and functions.

(39a) The new-born baby demonstrates dramatically its dependence on new experience for adaptive development, when it takes its first breath, not because it knows it must breathe air, but in response to the drastic change in its environment caused by the transition from life in a warm liquid to life in the relatively colder air.

b) The new-born baby demonstrates dramatically its dependence on new experience for adaptive development, when it takes its first breath, because it knows it must breathe air, in response to the drastic change in its environment...

(40a) The real question is how these (arrangements) should be adjusted, and, in particular, what measures Kenya would be willing to accept, in return for the continuance of the larger market, ...

b) The real question is how these should be adjusted, and what measures Kenya would be willing to accept, in return

a. Syntax - at this level, the question is whether the deletion of an RMC will result in an ungrammatical sentence. This of course is only relevant for RMCs used inter-sententially; both subordinate and coordinate clauses may be affected. An example is (35b), in which the deletion of although produces an impossible sentence. The deletion of and in (36) however, does not, although the punctuation may need to be changed.

b. Semantics - here, we want to see whether deletion can change the meaning of a sentence, although it remains grammatical. This question applies to cases such as (39) and (40). The meaning of (39b) is completely different from that of (39a). This drastic change comes about mainly because of the deletion of not, which I consider part of the RMC.⁷

If only but is deleted, then the resulting sentence is impossible. Deletion of in particular in (40) gives the meaning that there are in fact two 'real questions', or at least two parts to the same question. What is intended, in contrast, is that the 'Kenyan measures' constitute part of the question.

c. Pragmatics - in some cases deletion may make a particular interpretation less likely within the particular context. In (37), the second part is likely to be interpreted as an example in the (a) as well as the (b) version. In (38b), however, a concession interpretation is less likely without the RMC, and in fact the reader is likely to think that the writer is simply contradicting himself.

From this brief consideration of the application of deletability at the three levels, it will be obvious that RMCs are variously deletable at different levels and for different types. For instance, intrasententially they are less deletable than intersententially. Also, RMCs which specify addition or exemplification are more easily deletable than those which mark contrast.

To conclude, we can say that the possibilities of optionality are more significant for the learner in his production of discourse than those of deletability. The latter may provide a useful input for analysts and material writers, when they are engaged in adapting materials for learners.

3. Conclusion

I have attempted in this paper to give an indication of the great variety, and the importance, of those aspects of discourse which make explicit the ways in which the speaker wants his message to be understood. Such aspects, that is, metacommunication generally, include verbal and non-verbal devices, structural and paralinguistic, overt and not-so-overt. A piece of discourse without any metacommunicative marking at all, if possible to produce, would be impossible to interpret. It should thus be part of the concern of the linguist to investigate the different ways in which the speaker focuses on his own discourse. This paper makes a start in that direction by examining that type of overt, explicit metacommunicative marking which the speaker uses to make clear how one part of his discourse is connected to another. The aim has been to show how such relational metacommunicative comments contribute to the understanding of discourse relations, by on the one hand adding subtle implicatures to their interpretation, and on the other causing fundamental differences of meaning.

NOTES

1. By 'message' I mean the communicative intentions of the speaker as encoded in conventional linguistic form, and transmitted to the addressee through the production of discourse.
2. I am using 'communication' in a much wider sense than, for example, that used by Lyons who, having rejected a wider definition, restricts the term to 'intentional transmission of factual, or propositional, information' (1977:33)
3. In the literature various terms are used for language which is used to describe or discuss language. Lyons uses the expression 'metalanguage' (1977:10), and this is the favourite for other writers as well. Leech additionally uses the term 'metareference' (1980:38). Although I have been using the term 'metacomment' independently, I find that Stubbs (1983:59) uses the same term, and Brown and Yule (1983:132) a very similar term, 'metalingual comments'.
4. The examples used are taken from a corpus of newspaper articles and social science textbooks.
5. I use the expression 'propositional content' in the way it is used by Lyons (1981:111).
6. It needs to be emphasized, though, that these examples may be misleading in that, if they were to be used as parts of actual discourse, the contextual features present in the speech situation would most likely arouse the required 'suppositions' even if the RMCs were not used. This point is often overlooked, many writers tending to analyse examples as if they would occur in isolation.
7. For the type of relation exemplified by (39), the occurrence of not is obligatory in the first part of the relation. Its absence results in an incoherent relation. Consider:
African agriculture is not superior.
On the contrary, it is inferior.
? African agriculture is superior.
On the the contrary, it is inferior.

Thus, not must be considered part of the RMC in this kind of relation.

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