Towards a Description of Descriptive Discourse

BY TIM MACSAVENY
GIAL Student

ABSTRACT
This paper discusses the differences between [+tension] and [-tension] in expository discourse. A key question is whether descriptive discourse, which is [-tension], is notionally separate from expository or if it is a surface structure phenomenon. It is concluded that there is a clear distinction between a [+tension] argumentative discourse and a [-tension] descriptive or explanatory discourse. They are markedly different in notional structure, illocutionary force, and some key surface structure features. Crucially, the lack of ostensive author viewpoint, peak-marking, and reader-engaging features, and the four slots normally associated with expository discourse show that they are separate types of discourse.

Introduction
Longacre’s (1996) discourse typology is a helpful tool for analyzing texts. He posits four major discourse types based on two major features. The differences between [+tension] and [-tension] are clear enough. When these features are both [-], Longacre writes that expository discourse results. But, there are two more features which further subdivide each box; projection and tension. What about the differences between the less important axes? Which type of expository discourse is the most prototypical with regard to these other features? This paper will focus on the differences between [+tension] and [-tension] in expository discourse. One question this paper will address is if descriptive discourse, which is [-tension], is notionally separate from expository or if it is a surface structure phenomenon. Furthermore, if they are notionally separate, what relation do they really have with each other? Is Longacre’s [-tension] feature enough to explain the differences? The final question is this; which is the more basic discourse type? In order to compare these two types of discourse, let us first briefly look at their characteristics.

Research
Argumentative Discourse
Hohulin (2001) uses some helpful terminology that I will employ in this paper. She separates expository discourse into three sub-types: descriptive, explanatory and argumentative. Argumentative discourse correlates well to what Longacre means by [+tension] expository text, and so I will utilize Hohulin’s term in this paper.

Argumentative discourse, according to Longacre’s typology, is [-CTS], [-agent orientation], [+tension]. These negatives do not leave behind a void but are filled with other features: [+logical succession] and [+thematic orientation].

On the surface structure, all types of expository discourse is quite distinct from the other types. They use equative clauses, nominalization and existential verbs as mainline information. Normal expository discourse may use features like special particles, rhetorical underlining and special structures in order to mark peak. Transitivity values are very low in mainline expository text (Longacre and Hwang, in press). Generally, expository seems to be the opposite of narrative in many crucial ways.

Expository Discourse’s Similarities with Behavioral Discourse
Longacre (1996) cites Hoey in referring to the schema underlying expository discourse. The four slots mentioned are:
1) Problem
2) Solution
3) Supporting argumentation
4) Evaluation
As one can see from these slots, the most basic type view the authors is argumentative, the expository discourse of the [+tension] variety. It has a goal in mind: to persuade the reader towards a certain solution. This is similar in perlocution to the persuasive type of discourse. Compare these with the slots for hortatory discourse, placed in a different order from Longacre and Hwang (in press) in order to highlight the similarities:

1) Problem
2) Command element
3) Motivation for obeying
4) Authority and credibility of the text producer

These slots bear a resemblance to the argumentative slots. The problem is the same in both, and where the argumentative discourse would pose a solution, the hortatory text through use of imperatives views the solution as a call to action on the part of the reader. The supporting argumentation in the first type is a motivation to believe the solution, while the motivation for obeying in hortatory works towards a similar goal. Lastly, the evaluation and authority of the text producer both bring the author into the equation to weigh in on the issue. This is, of course, an oversimplification, but there do seem to be parallels to draw here.

However, expository and behavioral discourse types are quite separate in Longacre's view, differing on the binary feature [agent orientation]. But if this is so, how does expository discourse relate to a reader? Is it possible, then, that argumentative discourse is merely a maximally mitigated version of behavioral discourse aimed at changing a reader's mind about the solution in focus? One can see from the words chosen for the schema slots that the author's and reader's evaluative opinions are being dealt with. If not, then why problem, which presupposes an experiencer? Or solution, which does the same? Or supporting argumentation, meant to change a reader's view of a solution? Or evaluation, which is by definition an authorial comment? Every piece of argumentative discourse points towards human minds engaging over a thematic topic.

Hwang (2005) suggests a continuum with hortatory discourse influencing people actions, persuasive discourse influencing people's beliefs with their heart and expository influencing people's understanding with their mind. From this perspective also, then, it seems that [+tension] expository texts (for that is what these authors are writing about) could be proximally related to other texts that influence a reader.

Hohulin (2001) describes a feature of this type of discourse like this: “There will always be some evaluative information that is meant to persuade an audience to acknowledge a speaker/writer as informed, intelligent, and an effective communicator.” Indeed, according to Hohulin’s explanation, argumentative discourse has some surface structure differences, but notionally carries the same tone as hortatory texts; that of convincing a reader towards a certain idea. The method of convincing may be different; in hortatory texts there is minimally a call or plea to action, while argumentative texts will instead attempt to sway the reader with reason, and may not have any such imperative.

The intersentential relationships of [+tension] expository and hortatory discourses are similar as well. According to the analyses given in chapters 10 and 11 of Holistic Discourse Analysis (Longacre and Hwang, in press), they both can consist of multilayered arguments supporting one main thesis. This is quite different from the flat, joint structure generally found in descriptive discourse, which we will now address.

Descriptive Discourse

It is surprising how little is written about descriptive discourse. While it seems to be an important type of text, and most authors recognize it as such, it is rarely treated with detail. Perhaps many authors find little to say about it. Longacre (1996) refers to descriptive discourse indirectly when he writes, “First person accounts, newspaper reporting, and historiography all make pretensions of factuality.” (8) He also supposes that descriptive discourse may be “essentially different from expository discourse.” (13)

Hohulin (2001) describes descriptive discourse as one of three sub-types of expository discourse, alongside explanatory and argumentative. However, I find that her dichotomy of descriptive and explanatory discourse is hair-splitting, and will refer to both of these subtypes as descriptive discourse. Hohulin writes, “Descriptive information will express the speaker’s categorization of real-world entities and their properties, and his unique perception of those entities, their properties and functions.”
Surface Structure Features of Descriptive Discourse

Here are some surface structure features of descriptive discourse. Like argumentative discourse, descriptive tends towards existential verbs, equative clauses, and low transitivity clauses. According to an RST analysis of the Swahili text, there is a preponderance of multinuclear structures at every level of the discourse. A preliminary look at an article on Marriage in Nelson’s New Illustrated Bible Dictionary (1995) shows exactly the same. In fact, the texts are both split into subsections with the use of paratextual headings, forcing the reader into a multinuclear understanding of the material. This type of discourse is characterized by one theme being dealt with from different aspects. For example, the marriage article first deals with the origins of marriage, then the practice of marriage in the Old Testament, followed by the New Testament teachings about marriage. Nothing is in the text to signify anything other than a joint construction of these points on a theme. As suggested earlier, there is a time factor in this text, but because it is not contingent we can see that it is rather a logical succession of ideas.

Features which argumentative discourse uses to engage the reader are almost never found in descriptive discourse. In both the Swahili text and the English text analyzed in this paper, there are no dialogue, no rhetorical questions, no apostrophe. There may be some slight hints of peak-marking features in the Swahili article, but these are scanty at best. There does not seem to be a peak of any kind in the marriage article.

Hohulin (2001) shows that each higher-in-tension expository discourse type often employs the use of lower-tension ones as subtypes in order to make up the larger expository discourse. For example, an argumentative text will generally employ descriptive or explanatory material as part of its supporting argumentation. This tendency, however, does not seem to work in both directions. Descriptive discourses as a rule do not draw upon [+ tension] features, because that would violate the intended purpose of the text.

Notional Structure of Descriptive Discourse

It seems that the most crucial feature of descriptive discourse is its assumed objectivity. In this type, the writer places him- or herself completely out of scope. They never surface with authorial comment, and do not write evaluative material. The text is, as much as possible, given from the assumed perspective of a completely objective set of facts and data. Even in dealing with emotionally charged themes (like the description of the Opium Wars in my Swahili text), the author does not give an opinion on what could easily be seen as a very wrong situation. The language is deliberately chosen to seem free of bias, merely describing events, ideas and themes dispassionately.

This is similar to the treatment of marriage in Nelson’s New Illustrated Bible Dictionary (1995). Here, the bias can be assumed to be for a very traditional, Biblical view of marriage. And interestingly enough, while the bias is held true, never once does the author surface to espouse any particular ideology. The “facts”, based entirely on the context of the author’s perspective of the Bible, are presented dispassionately. The first line states,

‘the union of a man and a woman as husband and wife, which becomes the foundation for a home and family.’ (803)

Interestingly, the surface structure of nearly every article in the dictionary uses this same technique of a noun phrase shaped like predicate nominal of an equative clause as the first sentence. The point of placing this quote here, however, is that the author of the article descriptively lays out his own opinion (which is by no means universally shared) as a bald fact with no supporting argumentation or evaluation which might be expected from Longacre’s view of an argumentative discourse.

Not only is the writer not presupposed, but also the reader is not addressed in descriptive discourse. There are no appeals to a reader to be persuaded one way or another about the import of a text. It seems, in fact, that any import of a text is purely through implication, because the focus is on facts, explanations and reasons. Descriptive texts, which are most often found in reference works, seek to posit information without any need for reason or justification. These may be supplied by the larger cotext (like in the Bible dictionary), but each article could stand alone as its own separate discourse.
Analysis

Descriptive Discourse as a Surface Structure

Longacre’s (1996) major distinction between notional structure and surface structure is between the overall purpose of a discourse versus a discourse’s "formal characteristics." (8). Longacre does not treat descriptive discourse in his book, but does speak of drama as an example of a surface structure type of narrative. Even in this example, however, he seems unsure as to whether drama should be considered true surface structure or not, because it has elements of notional structure features as well. For example, it is written to be performed, which has to do with an overall purpose, and it is composed mostly of dialogue without quote formulas, which is a very different surface structure feature from normal narrative discourse.

Descriptive discourse is partly analogous to drama in this regard; its overall purpose is different from [+ tension] expository discourse, being primarily concerned with explaining rather than argumentation. Notionally, description lacks all of the important schema slots that are important to argumentative discourse; namely problem, solution, supporting argumentation and evaluation. The surface structures, on the other hand, are quite similar between the two types. Also, generally surface structure realizations are emic, but descriptive discourse seems to be available in many languages. Furthermore, descriptive discourse fits well into Longacre’s text types using the feature [- tension], where something like drama cannot be separated from normal narrative discourse in the same way. Thus, according to my analysis, descriptive discourse is a viable notional structure.

If it is a notional structure type, then it should also have schema slots like other types of discourse. The slots I posit are listed here:

1) Description/Explanation
2) Background Information
3) Elaboration
4) Exemplification

The minimal slot is the description itself. In the texts analyzed, background information is given in order to more fully understand the theme. Elaboration is made to focus on different aspects of the theme, again providing a fuller understanding rather than attempting to sway belief in any way. Lastly, examples show the import of the theme on the world. The example can sometimes be skewed into a different structure; for example, the opium text has a large exemplification section which is a narrative concerning the Opium Wars.

Prototype

What if descriptive analysis was plotted on a chart in the style of Hwang’s prototype analysis of discourse typology? As I wrote earlier, Longacre and Hwang (in press) note that argumentative discourse is itself related to persuasive discourse. According to my analysis, descriptive discourse may be the true prototypical expository type, because it is more truly [- agent orientation] than the more argumentative expository discourse. As I have noted, one of the key differences between these types is that descriptive discourse removes any reference to author or reader. The author is presented as an omniscient, unbiased figure and the reader is either assumed to also be objective, or not assumed at all. In fact, the style of the discourse type is primarily concerned with the lack of author or reader, almost artificially creating a context in which the text is a chronicle of objective truth, not modified by any bias towards author or reader.

In this way, couldn’t descriptive discourse be seen as the most prototypical in non-agent oriented, purely thematic discourse? Argumentative discourse, when seen in the light of prototype, is more engaged with the author-reader ‘dialogue’ by positing a problem (which requires an experiencer), a solution (which presupposes a value system), supporting evidence (which addresses the reader’s reasoning faculties to sort through the data to make a choice), and evaluation. In all these ways, argumentative discourse is proximally related to persuasive, and thus to hortatory, discourse. Descriptive discourse, on the other hand, lacks all of these features, and may be considered not only to be more prototypically expository in nature, but in fact may be the very end of the continuum as the most low profile, basic type of [- agent orientation] [- contingent temporal succession] discourse type.
Conclusion

It seems that overall, there is a clear distinction between a [+ tension] argumentative discourse and a [- tension] descriptive or explanatory discourse. They are markedly different in notional structure, illocutionary force, and some key surface structure features. Crucially, the lack of ostensive author viewpoint, peak-marking, and reader-engaging features, and the four slots normally associated with expository discourse show that they are separate types of discourse.

Also, expository discourse can be broken down and placed along the same continuum that Hwang (2005) has suggested between hortatory and persuasive discourse. If we employ Hohulin’s labels (and merge descriptive and explanatory, which seem to be quite similar), we come out with a continuum that looks like this:

Hortatory ➔ Persuasive ➔ Argumentative ➔ Descriptive

This scale would suggest that descriptive discourse is really the most prototypical type of expository discourse, due to its lack of orientation with regard to author or reader. The underlying notional structure purpose of the discourse is to discuss a theme, relaying information as from an objective source through an objective medium to an objective reader (or perhaps no reader at all).

Application

Because descriptive discourse, in this view, is at the end of the spectrum among the texts with no contingent temporal succession, it is the most basic of theme oriented, logically based texts. Expository texts that have argumentation should no longer be seen as the most natural type of discourse meeting these two criteria because they have more in common with behavioral texts than descriptive texts do. Crosslinguistically, this type of discourse could perhaps be used as a baseline for texts, because it is the most basic and because it is generally quite flat on the saliency schema.

Longacre and Hwang (in press) posit that expository discourse is not extremely common in languages, with narrative and hortatory types being more common, and only procedural being less. But perhaps if descriptive discourse were used as the basic type instead of argumentative, it might show a different correlation between discourse types. Perhaps descriptive exposition is more common than argumentative exposition, and texts could be elicited showing this.

Lastly, a fuller understanding of descriptive discourse could aid in language learning. If this type of text has the least amount of unusual surface features because of its low salience and transitivity, descriptive texts may be very helpful to the learner of a given language. The basic nature of the discourse type may be a good starting point for a student.

Bibliography


