

Making sense of discourse 3.1 Discourse coherence In the preceding chapter we looked at some of the building blocks of discourse. Thus, for interlocutor B in Widdowson's example to recognize that 'That's the telephone is functioning as 'request'', he or she must also have perceived the unstated proposition 'Could you answer it, please?' Yet these passages do not seem to conform to the principle established in chapter 2 namely, that coherent texts are distinguished from random sentences by the existence of text-forming, cohesive devices. I shall invite Professor Wilson and Senor Castellano right away (Edmonson 1981: 13)

Two points which should be noted here are, firstly, that in order to provide interpretable texts that lack cohesive markers, Widdowson and Edmonson provide very brief examples three utterances in the case of the first, and two sentences in the case of the second. I believe that interpreting discourse, and thus establishing coherence, is a matter of readers/listeners using their linguistic knowledge to relate the discourse world to people, objects, events and states of affairs beyond the text itself. EXCUSE A: OK. ACCEPTANCE OF EXCUSES In creating a meaningful context and identifying the functions of each utterance, coherence is established. Most native speakers would create a domestic situational context in which the following functions are assigned to each utterance: UTTERANCE FUNCTION A: That's the telephone. We saw that coherent discourse was distinguished from random sentences by the existence of certain text-forming, cohesive devices. He goes on to suggest that we are able to recognize this text as coherent by creating a context and then identifying the functions that each utterance fulfils within that context. (Before reading further, see whether you can construct a context which might lend coherence to these two sentences.) Edmonson provides the following context: 31 Did you know Calderon died exactly one hundred years ago today? In Widdowson's example, it is claimed that coherence is achieved through perception of the functions being performed by each utterance. Someone trying to comprehend spoken or written discourse must simultaneously perceive both the propositional meaning and functional intention of the speaker or writer. While any piece of language is ultimately interpretable with reference to extra-linguistic context, it is going too far to conclude that the language itself is somehow irrelevant or unnecessary. In other words, we shall look in greater detail at speakers and listeners, readers and writers, as they construct and interpret discourse. Text 3a has been taken from Widdowson (1978), who uses it to support his argument that cohesion is neither necessary nor sufficient for the establishment of coherence. The second point with which one might want to take issue is Edmonson's claim that any native speaker will immediately be able to establish the coherence of van Dijk's two sentences. In this particular instance, I believe that perception of the propositions must either precede or occur simultaneously with the recognition of functions. Edmonson (1981) also explores the issue of what distinguishes text from non-text (that is, coherent from non-coherent texts). Edmonson argues that any native speaker will immediately see a causal link between these two sentences. Their argument assumes that each utterance has a clearly identifiable function, the perception of which is somehow independent of the ideas or propositions expressed. This enables the complete propositional content of each utterance to be supplied by the listener. At the beginning of chapter 2, we examined some of the linguistic characteristics of coherent discourse. A Fury looking one if you ask me (Author's data) Charles Dickens was born on the seventh of February 1812, the year of victory and the year of hardship. Clearly, cohesion is neither necessary nor sufficient for the creation of coherent discourse. This is not the case with text 3e,

although I should point out that with a little ingenuity it is probably possible to construct a context for any two of the four sentences. However, when an extended context is provided, they are readily seen as coherent. Of course, the interlocutor can always deliberately misinterpret the functional intention of the speaker for humorous, ironic or other effects, as the following example shows. We shall charitably assume that the husband chooses the second interpretation for humorous effect. He claims that it is difficult to create non-texts from random sentences because some sort of context can generally be created which will give coherence to any set of sentences. He challenges van Dijk's (1977) assertion that the following two sentences are incoherent: 3h We will have guests for lunch. Despite these quibbles, I am in basic agreement with the notion that cohesion does not 'create' coherence, for reasons that I shall outline in greater detail later. A: OK. (Widdowson 1978) 36 4. Why? 2