

## Some Aspects of Coherence, Genre and Rhetorical Structure – and Their Integration in a Generic Model of Text

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Texts appear as syntagms, sequences of syntactically defined units (clauses, clause complexes, sentences), while, at the same time, forming a unified whole. The relation between the micro- and macro-levels of textual organization as well as the functioning of texts in their social context has been addressed by various models. Three such approaches will be discussed in this essay, associated with three different linguistic traditions: coherence analysis, genre theory, and rhetoric. I will argue that, despite their diverse origins, they are not incompatible and can be combined, representing, in fact, three aspects of textuality. Integration of these three aspects leads to the formulation of a generic *coherence model*, some important characteristics and requirements of which are discussed in the final part of this paper.

### 1. Introduction

It is a trivial observation that language is not limited to context-independent structures, but is used as a means for social interaction (Halliday 1978; 2004). Grammatical units combine to larger, functionally defined entities which constitute the units of communication. Such units are commonly referred to as texts. Less trivial, however, is the question of how that functional unity of texts is achieved; this has been one of the concerns for text linguists from the very beginning of that field (cf. De Beaugrande & Dressler 1981).

Several conceptual systems have been developed to analyze the interaction between a text and its constitutive parts, as well as the interaction between text and its social context. I will refer to three of them here: the analysis of *coherence* – targeting the semantic and functional unity of texts or parts of texts; *genre analysis* – as an attempt to relate text structure to its macro-social context, in particular the group of competent potential text users; and *rhetoric* – as the discipline concerned with the effective use of language, typically in the context of public speaking, in an uninterrupted tradition going back to classical antiquity.

In the sections to follow, I will mainly be concerned with links, conceptual convergences, between these three types of approaches to text analysis. My focus will thereby lie on the question of how to model that unity of the text, which leads to three sub-questions:

- How can we conceptualize the text as a meaningful and functionally unified entity?
- How should the interaction between text and context be conceived?
- How should the relation between textual micro- and macrostructures be conceived?

After discussing some of the key concepts of the three approaches mentioned, I will argue that, taken together, they provide a range of conceptual tools for analyzing textuality, i.e. the construction of a functionally unified (and thus, as we may say: a *coherent*) text out of (a sequence of) individual grammatical units, from three complementary perspectives. It is thus that I will propose analyzing the construction of texts in an *integrative approach*, combining the strengths of these individual analytic traditions.

## 2. Coherence

The notion of *coherence* is intricately linked to the notion of *text*, which arises out of the observation that a sequence of linguistic signs can display a “continuity of senses” (De Beaugrande & Dressler 1981: 84) – a condition for being understood as a *syntagm* – without belonging to a syntactically comprehensive structure reflecting that semantic continuity. In other words, continuity of senses exists across the boundaries of the largest grammatical unit, the clause complex or sentence. This continuity is called *coherence*; De Beaugrande and Dressler (1981) name coherence as one of seven ‘standards of textuality’. Although the continuity of senses is grounded on organizing features of the text surface, or *cohesion* (Halliday & Hasan 1976), textual coherence is itself not a feature of the text surface, but the result of cognitive processes (De Beaugrande & Dressler 1981; Graesser et al. 1997).

It is important to note that coherence exists on two different levels of textual organization: first of all, coherence refers to relations established between parts of the text. Thus, propositions combine to macropropositions in a process which is recursive (macropropositions can combine to form even higher-level macropropositions). Coherence hereby accounts for the organization of local senses in the text to arrive at a global sense. Such a macrosemantic view of text(s) is exemplified by van Dijk & Kintsch’s model of macropropositions, where, at the most abstract level, all propositions in a text are summed up in one macroproposition (van Dijk 1977; 1980; van Dijk & Kintsch 1983). Coherence relations between propositions are also analyzed as ‘clause relations’ (Winter 1982; Hoey 1983), and as – potentially recursive – relations between more abstract entities (‘nuclei’, ‘satellites’) in Rhetorical Structure Theory (Mann & Thompson 1988; Mann et al. 1992).

Second, once that the global level of the text is attained by a representation, textual coherence not only refers to relations between parts, but it appears as a factor lending unity to the text as a whole. The text appears as a unified entity, functioning as a whole. Halliday, e.g., calls it a ‘semantic unit’ (Halliday 1978: 135; cf. also Halliday 2004: 587).

We can therefore speak of ‘local’ vs. ‘global textual coherence’. It is the latter, aiming at the unity of the text and thus at a global representation, that will be particularly relevant for the question of the unity of the text. In this understanding, coherence provides a top-down (i.e. telic, goal-driven) framework for the organization of textual semantics.

A framework for the semantic organization of texts is not part of the text itself, but of the writer’s and reader’s world knowledge (social, communicative competence). It is thus that the notion of coherence, in its essence, provides a link between the text and the macro-social context of its production and reception.

The importance of the concept of coherence for textual analysis is that, whatever our perspective, the unity of the text is a given. The analysis of textual coherence therefore includes three aspects: (1) the internal structure of the text, i.e. how coherence is constructed through textual means; (2) the particular interaction of the text with its context of production and reception, i.e. the contextual definition and interpretation of the concrete nature of the text’s coherence; (3) the interaction between the two, i.e. the motivation of internal structural characteristics by its specific contextual unity.

## 3. Genre

As mentioned in the previous section, one source of textual coherence is the text users’ world knowledge, which includes knowledge of forms and functions of communicative interaction. In other words, texts do not function in isolation; in both form and function, they can be compared to texts fulfilling similar functions and displaying similar structural features. Texts appear as instances of *classes of texts*, which can be represented as – abstract – models. Genre theory refers to such classes of texts as *communicative genres*.

Three schools, or traditions, of genre analysis are commonly distinguished: New Rhetoric (Bazerman 1988; Freedman & Medway 1994), Register & Genre Theory influenced by Hallidayan Systemic Functional Linguistics (Martin 1985; 1992; Christie & Martin 1997; Eggins & Martin 1997) and an ‘ESP approach’ (Swales 1990; Bhatia 1993; Johns 1997; for discussion and further references see Hyland 2002: 114-115). It is, however, not the purpose of this paper to discuss the differences between these approaches to genre analysis; rather, I will be concerned with what constitutes their shared understanding, and what the concept of genre can contribute to an understanding of the relation between text structure and functioning of the text in its context.

The term *genre* is used to denote both a class of texts (communicative events), and the representation of such a class in an abstract – *generic* – model. Two conceptions are introduced in order to define and characterize the *modus operandi* of genres. Firstly, genres and the texts which belong to them are defined by a ‘social’ (Martin 1985; Eggins & Martin 1997) – or ‘communicative’ (Swales 1990) – purpose. Communicative purposes are closely linked to – relatively stable – communities of text users (‘discourse communities’, in Swales 1990), who define these purposes as social standards of communication. What is important for the discussion here is that such a conception represents the text from a holistic perspective: purposes correspond to types of interaction in which text users are engaged, and are fulfilled by the text *as a whole*.

Secondly, the way in which a text belonging to a given genre fulfils its communicative purpose is conventionalized within the discourse community owning that genre. Texts unfold in particular, typical ways, thus realizing *schematic structures* imposed by the genre. Such structures can be formulated as sequential models of text organization, realizing functionally distinct stages (‘moves’, ‘steps’) towards the accomplishment of the communicative purpose (Martin 1985; Swales 1990; Eggins & Martin 1997). An example of such a staged model Swales’ CARS model for the introduction of research articles, specifying the stages of the realization of the communicative purpose ‘Create A Research Space’ (cf. Swales 1990).

Genre analysis thus provides a way of relating macro- and micro-perspectives by looking at texts from a macro-interactional perspective, posing, at the same time, the question of the internal text structure. The internal structure of the text thus appears as motivated by the text’s macro-interactional properties.

#### 4. Rhetoric

The amount of disagreement on the exact meaning of the term *rhetoric* is notorious; accounts of rhetoric therefore frequently start with an overview of definitions and characterizations given to *rhetoric* (see, for example, Connor 1996; Gill & Whedbee 1997; Booth 2004). On a general level, *rhetoric* is used to refer to two different types of phenomena: (1) a particular configuration of a linguistic (semiotic) system (configuration of functions and an inventory of linguistic features, or, forms); and (2) the academic discipline concerned with the study of such systems (cf. Booth 2004). Apart from this slight ambiguity, I will here distinguish four senses in which *rhetoric* has been understood.

First, *literary rhetoric* is mainly concerned with the organization of the discourse: *topoi*, tropes, figures of speech etc. One such inventory of the tools and techniques of classical rhetoric is given by Lausberg (1998). This conception of rhetoric seems to stem from a literal reading of Quintilian’s well-known definition of rhetoric as “the art of speaking well” (*ars bene dicendi*).

Second, rhetoric has, from the very beginning, been conceived as the study of methods of persuasion and argumentation, therefore moving beyond the cognition of mere form, and focusing on the – intended – effect of the communication. Classical rhetoric, following Aristotle (1991), distinguishes between the three genres of *deliberative*, *forensic* and

*epideictic* discourse – corresponding to the rhetorical situations of speaking before a legislative body (politics), in court and at ceremonies and festive occasions. More recently, it has been recognized that rhetorical mechanisms and structures are not limited to these three genres, but appear in many places in public and private discourses in modern societies (e.g. rhetoric of advertising). Nevertheless, the focus on argumentation is still maintained, even though it is applied on modern genres. This is illustrated, e.g., by Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's (1969) *New Rhetoric*, subtitled 'A treatise of argumentation'. These authors define rhetoric as "the study of the methods of proof used to secure adherence" (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969: 1).

The manipulative potential of rhetorical techniques has given rise to strong criticism of the discipline, as well as normative models of rhetoric and argumentation explicitly motivated by humanistic values (van Eemeren & Grootendorst 1992; 2004; Booth 2004).

A third way in which *rhetoric* has been understood focuses on the general aspect of discourse as being communication, i.e. symbolic *interaction*. For example, Booth (2004: xi) writes: "Rhetoric is employed at every moment when one human being intends to produce, through the use of signs or symbols, some effect on another [...] rhetoric will be seen as the entire range of resources that human beings share for producing effects on one another [...]". Rhetoric therefore aims at that aspect of discourse which is intentional (purpose-driven) and instrumental (designed to fulfil that purpose).

Intentionality and instrumentality lead to the important question of the *rhetorical organization* of the discourse, i.e. the way in which textual structures are employed in order to achieve the desired effect. The framework of Contrastive Rhetoric, building on such a generally instrumental conception of rhetoric, investigates these structures of discourse organization (Kaplan 1966; Connor 1996).

Finally, *rhetoric* has been used in a social (and social constructionist) sense, focusing on the capacity of language to share organized experience, and therefore *organize collective experience* (cf. Billig 1987; Simons 1989; 1990; Potter 1996). This conception considers communicative events in their interaction with macro-social structures and entities, therefore going beyond the boundary of the individual communicative event.

For the questions asked here, the – rather technical, ornamental – conception of literary rhetoric is clearly too restricted; the same is true of limiting rhetoric to argumentation. Important though they may be, the purposes of argumentation, or manipulation, do not lead us to an understanding of how texts *per se* act as vehicles in human interaction. On the other hand, the point made by social constructionist approaches, that social structures are created through symbolic interaction (i.e. texts) cannot be easily dismissed. It transcends, however, the purpose of this essay, which is concerned with social (and discursive) macrostructures only in so far as they impress individual instances of interaction, but not *vice versa*.

Therefore basing my discussion on the view of discourse as symbolic interaction (the third conception presented above), I will refer to rhetoric in the following as that dimension of language use and its analysis which is concerned with the effective (i.e. goal-oriented) structural organization of the linguistic signal (text) in order to produce an intended effect on its receiver (listener, reader). Securing (in Perelman's words) "the mind's adherence" to the "theses presented for its assent", thus, *argumentation*, is only one out of a range of possible purposes (the analysis presented in section 5.5 will again draw on the purpose of argumentation). The 'intended effect' of the communication can, indeed, be non-argumentative: transmission of 'factual' content (e.g. narration, description, or exposition), giving instructions (for performing some extra-linguistic act, e.g. a cooking recipe), engaging in (a particular kind of) social interaction (e.g. a contract, a letter of complaint, or an invitation) – to name just a few. Rhetoric, as it is understood here, comprises the organization of texts to accommodate any of these purposes; therefore, its focus lies on the text as being embedded in a context of social interaction.

## 5. Convergences: towards an integrative model

### 5.1. Coherence – revisited

Coherence is related to the sense of a text (or a passage), or, more precisely, to the fact that there is a “continuity of senses”; it is not strictly textual itself (i.e. it does not reside in the material structure of the text), but the result of cognitive processes (De Beaugrande & Dressler 1981; Graesser et al. 1997; cf. above), and therefore a phenomenon of *text semiosis*.

The term coherence refers to the *possibility* to represent the text as a unified entity. One way of unifying a text’s sense is exemplified in van Dijk’s macropropositions (van Dijk 1977; 1980; van Dijk & Kintsch 1983); the communicative purpose of a text, as it is stipulated by genre analysis, constitutes another type of unified representation. These two approaches take two very different views on the question of coherence.

As for the first case, the coherence expressed in a macroproposition is essentially semantic and not limited to any particular, well-defined level of text organization. Macropropositions occur recursively and may reflect the coherence of parts of the texts as well as the text as a whole. There is no fundamental difference in the process of deriving a macroproposition of a higher or lower level of the semantic organization of the text. This kind of – semantic – coherence corresponds to what I have called above *local coherence* (cf. section 2), because it combines – usually adjacent – parts of the text into larger parts, by attributing them an overall sense (macroproposition), which subsumes the senses of its parts (micropropositions).

Relating the text’s unity to its communicative purpose, on the other hand, has quite different implications. The unity of the text, then, is not primarily situated on a semantic, but a pragmatic level: the text appears as a unit of interaction. This pragmatic meaning (function, purpose) is only attributed to the text as a whole, illustrating what has been called *global coherence* (cf. above, section 2). Global coherence may therefore be re-interpreted as *communicative purpose*.

In the following, I will refer to coherence as that level of text semiosis on which semantic and pragmatic unity of the text is established.

### 5.2. Three levels of text organization

When asking the question of how global coherence is established through a particular configuration of the text surface, we are therefore considering the interaction of structures and functions at three distinct level of text organization:

On its most basic level of organization, a text can be seen as a syntagm of grammatically defined units, the largest of which are generated by the syntactic component of grammar: clauses, clause complexes and – in written language – sentences. I will refer to these units as *micro-units*, and as *micro-level* to the corresponding level of textual organization. Micro-units have a (propositional) sense, hence their potential to form a coherent structure, displaying a “continuity of senses”.

On a higher level of textual organization, we see that micro-units combine to larger units, possessing coherence. This transition is modelled, e.g., by van Dijk’s macrorules (leading to macropropositions) and by the rhetorical relations identified in Rhetorical Structure Theory (cf. above, section 2). I will refer to the resulting units as macro-units, and to that level of textual organization as the macro-level. They are ‘macro’ because they are secondary, derived, entities: their extent is not defined by the grammatical system, but exclusively through their function (coherence). Note, however, that the rules for deriving macro-units operate recursively: macro-units can be formed either out of micro-units, or of other macro-units.

Even though they possess coherence, macro-units are not units of interaction; this status is reserved to the text as a whole, fulfilling a communicative purpose. Macro-units may constitute steps towards the realization of that purpose, but as such, they are meaningful only

in the functional context of the text. I will therefore consider the representation of the text as a unit of interaction as belonging to a distinct level of text organization, which I will refer to as the *global level*.

Now, if coherence is the result of a ‘cognitive process’, driven by the “assumption of coherence” (Brown & Yule 1983), how is it then possible to conceive of coherence as a *textual* feature; in other words: how can text analysis be thought to provide the basis for the analysis of coherence? The answer to this question will, once more, have to draw on genre analytic conceptions: coherence, as continuity of senses, can be seen as grounded partially in meanings represented in the text. However, these meanings are not self-sufficient, but refer to a – trans-textual – system of meanings (social, communicative knowledge); coherence of any text belonging to any genre is therefore encoded in a system of social meanings proper to that genre and thus related to the genre’s constitutive communicative purpose. Such a system of meanings will be called the genre’s *coherence model*. The principal characteristics of such generic coherence models will be outlined in the remainder of this section.

### 5.3. The large building blocks

The moves and steps identified by genre analysis can be characterized as *syntagmatic macro-units*, i.e. passages of the text which are larger than the largest grammatical units (clauses, clause complexes, sentences) and possess some unity grounded in a common function/meaning. At this point, a further distinction may be drawn. We may say that a move is a linguistic syntagm realizing some (genre-specific) textual macro-function. In other words, moves are situated at a macro-level in two respects: formally, in so far as they are represented as a sequence of micro-units; and functionally, because they display functional unity at that level.

What, then, does this functional unity represent? To begin with, it cannot be equated with the text’s communicative purpose; consider Swales’s (1990) CARS model of the introduction of research articles, where the following three moves are distinguished:

MOVE 1: Establishing a territory

MOVE 2: Establishing a niche

MOVE 3: Occupying the niche

These are, clearly, related to the research article’s communicative purpose, which may be specified as argumentative, and to the introduction’s purpose (as a ‘micro-genre’) in particular, which is to “create a research space” (hence, CARS) – and thus to *prepare the terrain for the argument*; however, none of these moves on its own can be said to completely fulfil any of these purposes. Communicative purposes are usually functionally complex structures requiring a number of conditions to be met; any individual move can be seen as a step towards realizing the overall communicative purpose by fulfilling one of its conditions.

Swales’ formulation of the functions of moves as propositions obscures the fact that these functions are, in turn, complex structures, involving logical entities or *concepts* (‘territory, niche’) and operations on these entities (*processes*: ‘establish, occupy’). To distinguish these two, I will, in the following, refer to (logical) *macro-units* and the relations between them.

So far, our conceptual apparatus for the macro-functional analysis of genres can thus be summed up as follows: logical macro-units result from the logical decomposition of the communicative purpose. To be exact, *types* of logical macro-units (e.g. ‘territory’, ‘niche’) have to be distinguished from *specific* macro-units (a specific territory, etc.). By constructing a macro-unit, one also realizes a particular type and, summatively, the logical structure of the communicative purpose. Syntagmatic macro-units, then, are the expression of that logico-semantic structure on the surface of the text. This relationship of staged realization (or construction) of the communicative purpose is illustrated in figure 1:

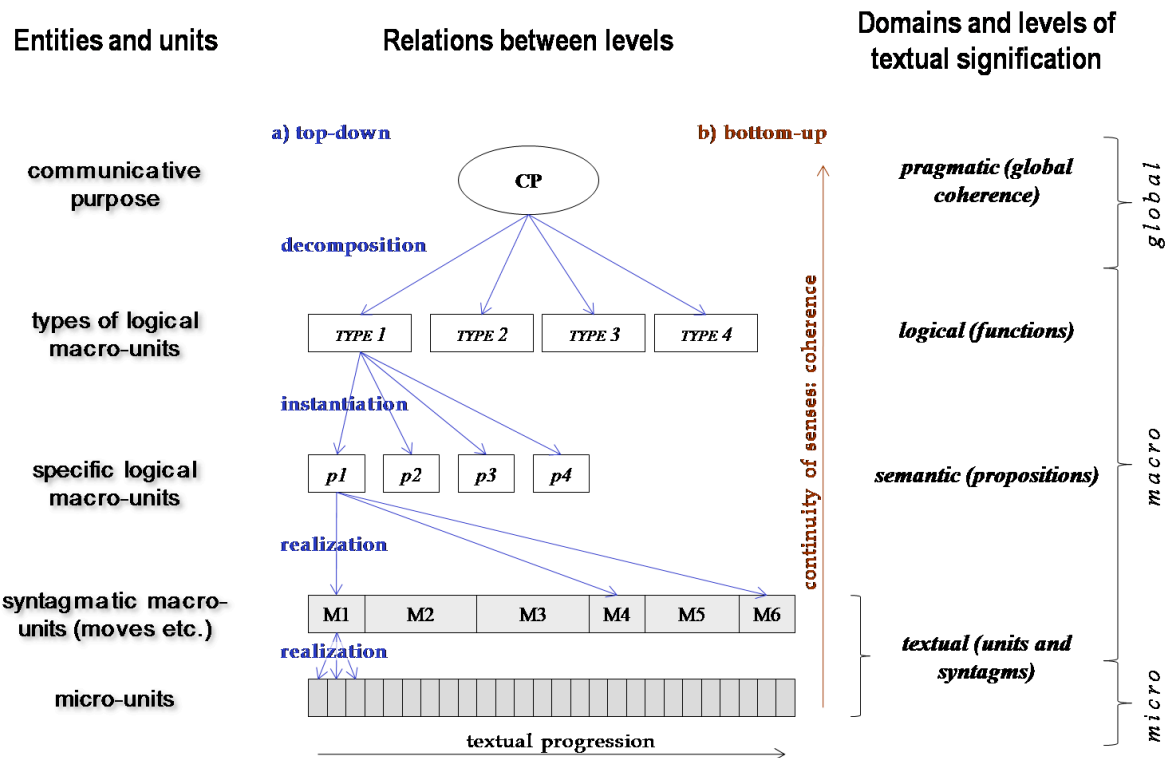


Figure 1. Realization of communicative purpose in a text.

#### 5.4. Genre and rhetoric: templates for the effective use of language

Texts are, obviously, rhetorical devices: they are instrumental in that they serve the interaction between writer and reader, which is expressed in their communicative purpose. Communication, *per se*, is purpose-driven and therefore rhetorical: the purposes of communicative events are linked to typified contexts, leading to generic text templates, which are defined by the social group of (competent) text users ('discourse community'). Interaction through texts therefore always draws, to some extent, on the intertextual context of the genre (cf. Hoey 2001: 2).

The observed inherent genre-based rhetoricity of texts has two important implications: first, language is used instrumentally, *effectively*, in order to fulfil the text's communicative purpose; second, the genre provides generic templates for doing so, giving preference to the use of certain features and structures over others.

The issue arises, now, of how to relate this rhetoricity of texts (on a global level) to the organization of their microstructure, thereby marking the transition from syntactically defined micro-units to utterances bearing a pragmatic function (cf. Levinson 1983: 18-19). Textual microstructure is therefore to be interpreted as a rhetorical structure, motivated by the global function of the text.

The rhetorical function of micro-units of the textual surface consists in their contribution to the construction of some – functionally defined – 'large building block' of global coherence. Such functions of micro-units, rendering explicit the relation of these units to the global text function (communicative purpose), will be called *microfunctions*. Rhetorical structure can therefore be considered as the *syntagmatic functional relations leading to the construction of global coherence*.

## 5.5. A coherence model

In the preceding sections, I have argued that coherence, genre and rhetoric (rhetorical structure) essentially aim at the same phenomenon, albeit from different angles: communication through complex signs, which are described as entities of a macro-level from a linguistic point of view, and which act as units of symbolic interaction. This double nature of compositeness and unity is expressed in the notions of *text* and *textuality*, with its three components:

- Global coherence: i.e. the establishment of an overall sense of the text (communicative purpose);
- Rhetorical structure: i.e. entities and structures at micro-level being used effectively for expressing that overall meaning (microfunctions);
- Generic structure: i.e. the text enacting, instantiating a (socially defined) type of symbolic interaction.

The purpose of this last subsection is to outline some characteristics and requirements for a model of text uniting these three aspects. I am referring to such a model as *coherence model*.

A coherence model, as it is understood here, can be defined as a generic model accounting for the emergence of global – and therefore pragmatic – coherence of texts belonging to a particular type (genre), based on a functional reading of textual microstructure (as rhetorical structure).

In a first step, such a model will provide a characterization of the genre in question by specifying its types of macro-units and microfunctions (cf. above, 5.3 and 5.4).

The types of macro-units of the global text function follow from a logico-semantic decomposition of the communicative purpose into its functional elements. This is necessary as the communicative purpose is (usually) too complex to be fulfilled at once, but requires the presence of several elements. Logically, these elements are present simultaneously; in the text, however, they are constructed gradually, any particular, functionally homogeneous, passage focusing on only one of them. E.g., the communicative purpose ‘argumentation’ (i.e. “to induce or to increase the mind’s adherence to the theses presented for its assent”, as in Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969: 4) in the genre *argumentative student essay* can be seen as composed of the following macro-units (Heuboeck, forth.):

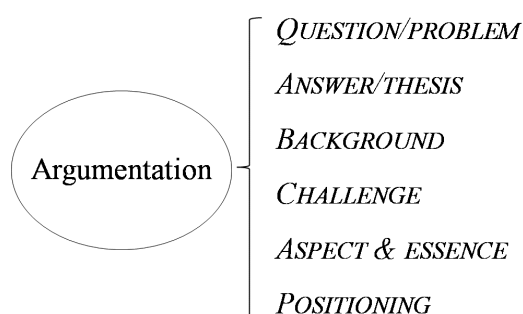


Figure 2. Types of macro-units of argumentation.

On the level of textual micro-units, a system of microfunctions has to be specified, naming the functions that these units can fulfil in constructing the macro-units of every type. For the purpose of illustration, the possible functions of micro-units related to the construction of the macro-unit ANSWER/THESIS are summarized in Figure 3 below (cf. Heuboeck, forth.):



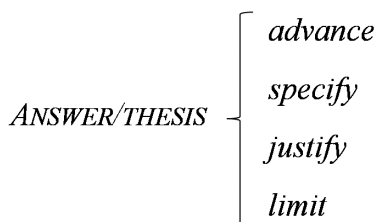


Figure 3. Microfunctions related to the construction of the argumentative macro-unit ANSWER/THESIS.

This is to say that a given micro-unit can contribute to the construction of a macro-unit of argumentation of the type ANSWER/THESIS by either ‘advancing’, ‘specifying’, ‘justifying’ or ‘limiting’ it.

In a further step, these two systems of paradigmatic relations allow the elaboration of a sequential (syntagmatic) model of the genre in question – generally recognized as an essential component of a genre theory (cf. above, section 3). This, again, will comprise the two aspects: delimitation of syntagmatic macro-units (‘stages’, ‘moves’, ‘steps’) by both text-based signals (cohesive devices) and macrofunctions; and realization of macro-units through patterns of microfunctions (i.e. restrictions on their possible combinations).

## 6. Conclusion

In this essay, I have discussed the contribution of three conceptual approaches to a model of global coherence of texts, termed *coherence model*: the analysis of coherence, genre analysis, and rhetoric.

A distinction has been drawn between three relevant levels of text organization, which builds on notions of these three approaches: At its highest level, the text constitutes a unity of social interaction, represented by the notion of ‘communicative purpose’. This has been called the *global level* of text organization. Second, the text is organized in large parts, or ‘building blocks’; although they are semantically and functionally unified entities, they cannot be separated from the text as a whole and therefore do not constitute unities of interaction on their own. These large parts of the text have been called *macro-units*, and the corresponding level of text organization the macro-level. Finally, texts are realized as a syntagm of – grammatically defined – linguistic units (clauses, clause complexes, sentences). They constitute the *micro-level* of textual organization.

The notion of *coherence model* has been introduced to designate a model specifying a type of texts, in a generic way, on all three levels: its communicative purpose, on a global level; the decomposition of the communicative purpose into types of macro-units; finally, the micro-functions through which micro-units contribute to the construction of higher-level entities.

The model outlined here is exclusively text-based, offering no account for the actual cognitive processes through which coherence is established. Rather, the notion of ‘coherence’ serves as the – abstract – frame for a global, functional representation of the text. Therefore, it may be understood as a meta-model which has to be instantiated in concrete coherence models of individual genres. It provides an account of the relations between the structural and functional conditions forming the basis of that – cognitively established – ‘continuity of senses’. The last section briefly outlined, by way of an example, how a specific coherence model of an individual genre can be formulated.

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