

DOES THE PERCEIVED COHERENCE OF A DISCOURSE HINGE ON THE EXPLICIT REALIZATION OF COHESIVE TIES?

Jasmina Mirtoska¹

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the long-standing debate in linguistics about the relationship between cohesion and coherence, by elaborating on both concepts as well as their unique role in discourse. The current discussion focuses on their principal meanings and interrelatedness as features of a discourse. It begins by defining both concepts and examining their theoretical foundations, contrasting perspectives that treat them as interdependent with those that argue for their autonomy. Drawing on adapted textual examples, the paper offers an empirical investigation into how cohesion and coherence can co-occur, diverge, or compensate for one another in creating meaningful discourse. The empirical analysis is qualitative, utilizing a set of carefully designed and modified textual examples that isolate and vary the presence or absence of cohesion and coherence. The findings demonstrate that while cohesive devices can support coherence, coherence itself is primarily a cognitive construct and a prerequisite for achieving "textness", namely, the quality that renders a stretch of language interpretable as a unified whole. This argument challenges models that position cohesion as the main determinant of textuality.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The relationship between cohesion and coherence has long been a subject of debate in linguistic and discourse studies. While both are essential components of textuality, scholars remain divided on the nature of their interdependence. On one side of the debate, researchers such as Halliday and Hasan (1976) argue that cohesion, a surface-level textual feature realized through cohesive ties, is what ultimately determines coherence.

Others, however, counter this claim by emphasizing that coherence is a cognitive construct shaped by the reader's interpretation, and as such, can exist independently of overt cohesive markers (Brown & Yule, 1983; Carrell, 1982; Kleijn et al., 2019; Reed & Kershaw-Herrera, 2015).

This paper revisits this central debate by exploring both theoretical perspectives and providing illustrative

examples that highlight the nuanced interaction between cohesion and coherence in discourse. Through adapted textual analyses, it becomes evident that while cohesive devices can facilitate the construction of coherence, they are neither necessary nor sufficient on their own. In contrast, coherence appears to be indispensable for a stretch of language to be considered a meaningful and interpretable text.

By analyzing cases of coherence without cohesion and vice versa, this paper argues that coherence plays a more crucial role in achieving "textness" namely, the quality that makes a stretch of language function as a communicative unit. This insight has significant implications for both linguistic theory and pedagogical practice, particularly in how discourse is analyzed and how writing is taught in educational contexts. Ultimately, this paper contributes to a more refined understanding of textuality and sets the groundwork for future empirical

¹ Corresponding author: Jasmina Mirtoska
Email: jmirtoska@gmail.com

studies on the interplay between these two foundational concepts in discourse analysis (Kehler, 2004).

The significance of this paper lies in its integrative approach, which bridges theoretical discussion with empirical illustration to offer a more balanced and comprehensive perspective on the cohesion–coherence relationship. By critically engaging with longstanding claims and providing concrete textual examples, it helps clarify a key issue in discourse analysis that has practical implications for text evaluation, language pedagogy, and academic writing instruction. This work contributes to current research by challenging reductive views that prioritize surface-level features and by emphasizing the cognitive dimension of coherence in textual interpretation. Additionally, it highlights the need to reassess how writing is taught and assessed, particularly in multilingual and English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) contexts. The findings offer valuable insights for educators, curriculum designers, and applied linguists, while also pointing toward future avenues of research involving digital tools such as AI, which can further refine our understanding of how cohesion and coherence function in authentic communication.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Cohesion and coherence as two important elements of a well-constructed and comprehensive text, have been claimed to be closely related by some researchers (Fulcher, 1989; Halliday & Hasan, 1976; Rankin, 1984; Louwerse & Graesser, 2005) while others argue the opposite, suggesting that they are independent (Brown & Yule, 1983; Carrell, 1982; Kleijn et al. 2019; Reed & Kershaw-Herrera, 2015; Morgan & Sellner, 1980; Mosenthal & Tierney, 1984; Sanders & Sanders, 2006; Sanders & Maat, 2006; Widdowson, 1978; Xi, 2010). Precisely, Halliday and Hasan (1976), who initiated this debate, take one side of this argument and say that cohesion determines coherence. This claim was followed by a lot of criticism from the researchers who took the other side, saying that coherence does not depend on cohesion (Brown & Yule, 1983; Carrell, 1982; Morgan & Sellner, 1980). Kleijn et al. (2019) suggest that cohesion through the use of connectives can facilitate the reader's construction of coherence but is not the sole determinant of the coherence itself. They establish that cohesion is a tool that helps to establish coherence while coherence is a cognitive process in the reader's mind. Reed and Kershaw-Herrera (2015) claim that coherence happens when the reader understands and organizes the idea logically, even if the text doesn't have many clear connectives. Both sides justify their claims by providing examples which illustrate the role of cohesion and coherence as well as the way in which they interact. Their claims and rebuttals are illustrated through adapted exemplifications, which will help to clarify the role of cohesion in coherence.

To move beyond theoretical discussions and further illuminate the complex relationship between cohesion

and coherence, this study incorporates an empirical investigation grounded in text analysis. The purpose of the empirical component is to demonstrate whether and how a text can function in the presence of cohesion but absence of coherence, and vice versa. By presenting and analyzing original and adapted texts that vary in their use of cohesive markers and coherent structure, this study aims to test the claim by Halliday and Hasan (1976) that cohesion is the defining feature of textuality. The investigation also examines counterarguments from scholars such as Brown and Yule (1983), Carrell (1982), and Mosenthal and Tierney (1984), who assert that coherence is independent of cohesion and that meaning arises primarily through reader interpretation and background knowledge. Through a close comparative reading of these constructed examples, the study seeks to determine whether cohesive markers truly facilitate comprehension and whether their presence or absence impacts a text's perceived unity and interpretability.

3. METHODOLOGY

The empirical analysis is qualitative in nature and relies on a series of constructed and adapted textual examples that isolate and manipulate the presence or absence of cohesion and coherence. The primary method involves comparing pairs of texts: (1) texts that are coherent but lack cohesive markers, (2) texts that are cohesive but lack coherence, and (3) texts that are both cohesive and coherent. These texts are analyzed using the cohesion framework established by Halliday and Hasan (1976), which identifies five major categories of cohesive ties: reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction, and lexical relations (Tanskanen, 2006). The texts are first coded for these markers to assess their cohesive density. Then, their coherence is evaluated based on logical sequencing, topic continuity, and inferential accessibility, drawing on frameworks by Carrell (1982), Brown and Yule (1983), and Sanders & Maat (2006). In addition, comparative interpretations are provided to examine whether the addition or removal of cohesive markers improves or hinders the reader's ability to interpret the text. The data includes both narrative examples and short dialogues, designed to simulate natural language use and test coherence in realistic discourse contexts. This analytical approach allows for a clearer understanding of how cohesion and coherence function independently and interactively in textual construction and interpretation.

3.1. Coherence and Cohesion: Conceptual Clarification and Empirical Analysis

Coherence refers to how different parts of the text relate to each other, such as by adding details of explaining causes. Coherence is what the linguistic tradition calls 'the property of an ideal text' (Sanford & Moxey, 1995). Cohesion is about the connections between sentences that help the text feel unified and linked. Words and phrases called cohesive markers signal how ideals develop and

guide readers to understand that texts main point or purposes.

According to Mani (2001) “coherence is represented in terms of relations between text segments, such as elaboration, cause or explanation” (p. 241). Authors like Halliday and Hasan (1976); Sanford and Moxey (1995) define cohesion as a property of the ‘ideal text’ which consists of ‘cohesive relationships’ and ‘cohesive ties’ between sentences that make the text ‘linked’. Yeh (2004) concludes that ‘cohesive markers’ serve as signals that point out the way in which a certain topic develops throughout a piece of writing. Additionally, they cite Fulcher (1993) who adds that these markers are also used to ‘guide’ the reader through the text and help discover the aim or the standpoint of the writer.

Moreover, some of the cohesive relationships suggested by Halliday and Hasan (1976) which contribute to the connectedness and consistency of a text are: reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction and lexical relations. The function of each is identified and exemplified in the text below:

Today, Linda woke up at 8 o'clock, because she had to go to the train station and pick up her boyfriend. She was so exited to see him again, that she decided to walk all the way to the station on a Sunday morning, even though he told her not to. She wanted to look good for him so, she spend 15 minutes deciding whether to put on red lipstick or pink lipstick. When she looked at her watch and discovered that she hadn't got much time, she put pink on and rushed out thought the door. She almost forgot to say bye to her dad. The old man, shared her joy and just couldn't wait for them to get married. (my example)

Linda-she; boyfriend-he/him are examples of referential (personal) cohesive relation. The example with not to represents a substitution for to walk all the way to the station on a Sunday morning. Moreover, pink is nominal ellipsis for pink lipstick; so is a causative conjunction and old man is lexical cohesion (synonym) for dad. According to Halliday and Hasan (1976), these cohesive markers and many more are what give a text a high degree of ‘textness’. In addition to this, they cite Reinhart (1980), who identified three main properties that every ideal text should have: connectedness, consistency and relevance. These three properties can be seen in the previous text in the way that the clauses in the text were connected with conjunctions, there was a logical link between each sentence and they all were referring to the same topic. Carrell (1982, p. 479) warns instructors of English that the knowledge of cohesion and the application thereof in the text analysis or creating process will not take care of the coherence issues.

3.2. The Interplay between Coherence and Cohesion

The text about Linda illustrates that both cohesion and coherence can be found within the same text, which

means that they both are important properties of a good text. Furthermore, Halliday and Hasan (1976, p. 9) answer the question of how coherence and cohesion interact by saying that cohesive markers are “the ONLY source of texture”. On the other side, Brown and Yule (1983), Sanford and Moxey (1995), Yeh (2004) and others, do not agree with this claim and they even say that markers of cohesion are “neither necessary nor sufficient” in order for a text to be coherent.

Sanders and Sanders (2006:598) say traditionally, text level linguistics has characterized connectedness of a text by looking at the ‘overt linguistic elements’ in other words cohesion. Even though much focus has been placed on the cohesion approach in the past, now the focus is on coherence since “the connectedness of text is considered a characteristic of the mental representation rather than of the text itself” (Sanders & Sanders, 2006:598). In addition, they say that connectedness can be achieved without cohesive markers however; they still give importance to linguistic signals of coherence. Coherence requires linguistic signals or “processing instructions” (reference, connectives, lexical markers) in the text for reconstruction.

Fulcher (1989) discusses how applied linguists and schema theoreticians view the difference between coherence and cohesion. Namely, while applied linguistics sees cohesive markers as fundamental for a cohesive text, the schema theoreticians claim that worldly knowledge is required to compered cohesion. Considering the reading process and how both the text and the reader play an important role, Fulcher (1989) recommends that the reading process would be beneficial for both above mentioned approaches as a part of a bigger theory including both approaches. His empirical findings show that “there is a link between coherence and cohesion” as well as cohesive markers serve to link things together and to signal devices in a text (159). Carrell also (1982:481-482) contrasts claims made by Halliday and Hasan (1976, p. 5) who perceives coherence as part of the linguistics of the language while cohesion belongs to the system of the language. Morgan and Sellner (1980) who on the other hand, claim that a text can be coherent if it just has coherence but it needs cohesion for complete coherence of the text. Furthermore, since it is not knowledge of language that helps us understand the sentence but its background knowledge that does this, Morgan and Sellner (1980) conclude that the cohesive relationships have been malformed by Halliday and Hasan (1976). Carrell (1982, p. 484) then gives an example where coherence is achieved without explicit cohesive markers:

“The picnic was ruined. No one remembered to bring a corkscrew.”

What makes the text coherent here is the background knowledge about why the picnic was ruined even though there is no explicit cause and effect cohesive marker like because or since in either of the sentences. In addition, Carrell (1982) points out that even empirical

investigations are in favor of Morgan and Sellner's (1980) claims and do not support Halliday and Hasan's (1976) views of coherence and cohesion. Carrell (1982) concludes that coherence causes cohesion and not the other way around. On the contrary, Rankin (1984:158) states that Carrell (1982) erroneously declares Halliday and Hasan's (1976) theory about cohesion as not complete. The reason used for warning teachers of English about the grammar of text is that the main reliance is on previous knowledge, while Rankin (1984) insists that Halliday and Hasan's (1976) theory did take common knowledge and grammatical awareness as important parts of their theory of cohesion which was proven with the ESL learners used the study. Carrell (1984:161) points out as a response to Rankin (1984) by stating that cohesion theory should not be used as a sole mean of fixing text issues. In addition, what is required for processing text is 'background information' and text interaction rather than 'innate grammaticality' as stated by Rankin (1984).

Louwerse and Graesser (2005:216-217) look at coherence in discourse and claim that "cohesion alone is not sufficient for the interpretation of the discourse" and according to psycholinguistics cohesion rather helps to achieve coherence. According to researchers they link coherence to the "concepts and relations underlying the meaning" of a text, also refers to it as the general connectedness of a text, and finally defines it as a "continuity in meaning and context". Coherence here is linked to the "surface structure of the text", "sometimes to smaller units", and finally it is referred to as a "continuity in word and sentence structure". Furthermore, 'discourse-as-product' is a linguistic construction enhanced by cohesion and 'discourse-as-process' is a communicative occurrence enhanced by coherence (Louwerse & Graesser, 2005:217).

Xi (2010:141) states that cohesion is still an unclear issue and subject to debate. He says that there has been much disagreement about the nature of cohesion, namely while Halliday and Hasan (1976) say that this nature is semantic, other researchers describe it as a "surface relation" or link it to the "linguistic devices" in the text. The first reason for this is the assumption that cohesion and cohesive markers are identical. While Halliday and Hasan (1976) look at cohesion in an in-depth manner and identify it as a semantic concept, other researchers look at cohesion superficially and equate it to the visible cohesive markers (Kadhim, 2024). The second reason for the chaos is the level of analysis "inter-sentential" and "intra-sentential" a problem caused by the amount of grammatical influence on discourse analysis (Xi, 2010:142). Third, different researchers have developed classification schemes which cannot be compared since their classification criteria are different (p.143). The main problem here is the naming of the devices and the presence or absence of these in a given classification. The fourth problem that causes the chaos in cohesion studies is the fact that different cohesive markers are used in different languages as well as in different text types (Xi, 2010:143).

Finally, he outlines three most popular beliefs about the way in which coherence and cohesion are related. Some researchers, state that "the presence of cohesion does not necessarily lead to coherence", others claim that "coherent texts do not need to be cohesive" and the third opinion is that "cohesion is a necessary but not a sufficient condition in achieving coherence" (Xi, 2010:144). Halliday and Hasan (1976) in their first chapter want to what is the difference between passages perceived as a "unified whole" and "collection of sentences". A text is a semantic unit not a grammatical unit. Cohesion is also semantic and it can be grammatical (reference, substitution and ellipsis) and lexical (reiteration (repetition, synonymy etc.) and collocation (co-occurrence of lexical items)).

- a. It's raining. -Then let's stay at home.
- b. Since it's raining, let's stay at home.

In this example there is no cohesive tie, but cohesion is achieved through the semantic relation: cause, since cohesion is a text-forming relation.

3.3. Coherence without cohesion

Connectedness can be achieved without cohesion (Sanders & Maat, 2006:592). By analyzing some examples they claim that "the cohesion approach to connectedness is inadequate" (p.592). They further argue that connectedness is not a feature of the text but a feature of the 'mental representation of the text'. Since the combination of 'common sense' and previous 'knowledge' suggested by Halliday and Hasan (1976) are not required for achieving connectedness shows that cohesion is not crucial for achieving connectedness. They go on to explain how when connectedness is achieved its called coherence namely referential and relational coherence. In order to find out whether Halliday and Hasan's (1976) claim that a text must have cohesive markers in order to be coherent, a text will be illustrated which contains most of the coherence properties but no cohesive markers:

*My brother was born when I was four years old.
My brother's name is Liam. My brother liked little
toy cars. My brother has his own car now. My
brother never liked school when my brother was
little. My brother goes to college now. My father
wants my brother to go to college.*

It is apparent that this text has no instances of reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction and lexical relations all examples of cohesion. However, note that the text refers to the same topic and has logical connections between the sentences. What is more, we still are able to understand what the text is about, without any great difficulties. But, what will happen if we insert cohesive markers in the above illustrated text? Will we be more able to understand the text if it has cohesive ties? Let's look at the same text again:

My brother was born when I was four years old and his name is Liam. He liked little toy cars but now he has his own car. He never liked school when he was little and yet he goes to college now, because my father wants him to.

From reading both texts one could come to the conclusion that the second text is more cohesive than the first one due to the cohesive ties inserted in it. However, did the markers improve our comprehension of the text and did it reveal any extra information? The answer to these questions will become clearer after looking at the following examples which clearly lack every form of cohesion markers:

Conversation 1:

A: Can you pass me that book, please?

B: Sorry, my hands are wet.

A: Oh, O.K. then. Don't worry.

Conversation 2:

A: Honey, can you fix my tie for me, please?

B: I just polished my nails.

A: O.K.

In these examples there is clearly no cohesive markers at all, however, the sentences are still comprehensive and logical, due to the Brown and Yule's (1983), "semantic relations" between the sentences. Moreover, Widdowson (1978) says that the reader can make 'inferences' from the information which is presented to him or her, even in cases of no cohesion. This ability of the reader to understand a text that does not have cohesive links is referred to as the "reader's contribution" (Carrell, 1982). Consequently, these examples that lack cohesive markers are still understandable and do not influence the coherence of the text to such a degree that they do not function as a text anymore.

Mosenthal and Tierney (1984) state the research has found that cohesion doesn't cause coherence. They further claim that viewing cohesion as using "linguistic description as a text analytical device" could lead to false assumptions (p.242). On the same page they outline several of them: the 'quantity of cohesive ties' on its own produces coherence and influences the understanding of the text; that the cohesive ties could 'reduce the cognitive demands' for understanding; cohesion a 'reader-independent text variable' through which comprehension is fostered. Then they claim that the cohesive marker can be ambiguously used by the writer which discredits the last claim and opens place for interpretation of the meaning of that text where the cohesive marker was used. In addition, they quote Morgan and Sellner (1980) who say that cohesion helps coherence to be achieved but does not cause it. Furthermore, they claim that content is the source of coherence and cohesion is a consequence of coherence and not a source (Mosenthal & Tierney, 1984:242-243). According to them, the claim from Morgan and Sellner (1980) contradicts the claim that comprehension is facilitated by the 'quantity of cohesive

ties' on its own. Then they refer to other studies which identified that cohesion is not reader independent and does not foster understanding. They conclude that Halliday and Hasan's (1976) 'text unity' cannot be achieved solely by cohesion.

3.4. Cohesion without coherence

The previous examples demonstrated that if the cohesive markers are omitted in a text, that does not directly affect the coherence of that text, because the text is still has most of the coherence features. This raises the question of whether a text without coherence but with an abundance of cohesive markers will have the same effect. In order to see whether a text can still function in the absence of coherence, despite the presence of cohesive markers, consider the following example (an adaptation of Enkvist's, 1978):

Tina likes Barbies. Dolls are made out of plastic. Plastic is artificial. Artificial leather is not as good as real leather. Real leather garments involve killing animals. Killing animals is some people's hobby. My hobby is fishing. Fresh fish tastes better than frozen fish. The lake was frozen over the winter. Last winter was the coldest winter in Cambridge.

This text has clearly many examples of cohesion which connect the sentences, like for example: *Barbies-Dolls; artificial-Artificial leather; hobby-my hobby; fishing-fresh fish*, etc. However, even though the text is cohesive in a way, it is not coherent since there is no logical connection between the sentences and they are irrelevant to the topic. Moreover, unlike in the examples which lacked cohesion, in this case the reader is not able to "contribute" or to make any "inferences" in order to interpret the text. As a result of this, a text can still be coherent even when it lacks markers of cohesion, but it cannot function if it does not have coherence.

Brown and Yule (1983) investigated this issue by taking a text of 6 sentences from a book ("*The Lost World*" Sir Arthur Conan Doyle) and manipulated the order of the sentences in such a way that the text was not coherent anymore. Moreover, they found out that the readers weren't able to "identify" the text as a text or make any inferences without the initial order of the sentences. Even though the text's cohesive markers weren't manipulated and were still in their original form, their presence alone couldn't secure the "textness" of the text. Therefore, Brown and Yule (1983, pp. 194-197) answer their first question of whether "cohesion is necessary to the identification of a text" by saying "formal cohesion...will not guarantee textual cohesion".

4. DISCUSSION

The analysis of cohesion and coherence reveals a nuanced relationship between the two, highlighting that

while they often co-occur in well-formed texts, one does not necessarily guarantee the presence of the other. Cohesion refers to the surface-level linguistic ties, such as reference, substitution, and conjunctions, that connect sentences, whereas coherence is a deeper semantic feature that relies on logical relationships and the reader's ability to construct meaning. Empirical examples show that coherence can exist without cohesion, as in texts where inferencing and shared background knowledge enable comprehension despite a lack of cohesive markers. Conversely, texts with cohesive devices may still lack coherence if the ideas are disjointed or lack relevance. Scholars like Halliday and Hasan (1976) see cohesion as essential for "texture," but others, including Carrell, Morgan and Sellner, and Sanders and Maat, argue that coherence is primarily a mental construct shaped by the reader's interpretation. Overall, findings suggest that coherence is the more essential property for text comprehension, and that cohesion may support, but does not ensure, coherence.

5. CONCLUSION

The criticism that followed Halliday and Hasan (1976) established that cohesion determines coherence, exemplified the opposite in a convincing way. Moreover, the texts provided in this article, which are adaptations of the original examples provided in the criticism of the initial claim about the role of cohesion in coherence, demonstrated instances of cohesion without coherence and coherence without cohesion. From the examples it was evident that a text that lacks cohesion can still be understood and interpreted, however a text that lack coherence cannot be referred to as a text, since no inferences can be drawn from such a text. As a result of this, it can be concluded that a text can still be coherent even when it lacks markers of cohesion, but it cannot function as a text if it does not have coherence.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE WORKS

Future research could explore the interaction of coherence and cohesion in multilingual ELF contexts to determine whether the same patterns hold across

different language backgrounds. Additionally, a longitudinal study could example how explicit instruction of cohesive devices impacts the learner ability to produce coherent texts over time. Investigating digital writing tools and their influence on coherence and cohesion in student writing could also provide valuable insights into modern writing practices. Finally, more empirical work is needed to clarify whether coherence can consistently be achieved without over cohesive markers particularly in academic and professional genres.

Furthermore, investigating digital writing tools, including AI language models like ChatGPT, and their influence on students' cohesion and coherence strategies could provide valuable insights into evolving writing practices. AI language models like ChatGPT can offer new methodological opportunities for examining the relationship between cohesion and coherence in discourse. Unlike traditional approaches that rely on human judgment alone, ChatGPT can be trained or prompted to generate texts with varying degrees of cohesion and coherence, enabling researchers to systematically manipulate and analyze these features in controlled conditions. Additionally, ChatGPT can be used to evaluate and annotate large corpora of student writing, providing consistent, scalable assessments of cohesive devices and perceived coherence across genres and proficiency levels. By simulating different reader perspectives, AI can also help test how changes in text structure affect interpretation and coherence construction. Furthermore, cross-linguistic and multilingual studies could use ChatGPT to explore how language background influences the processing and production of cohesive and coherent texts. As such, AI tools like ChatGPT enhance empirical rigor and also offer a replicable framework for resolving long-standing theoretical debates in discourse analysis and applied linguistics.

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Jasmina Mirtoska

American University of the Middle

East: Al 'Uqaylah,

Kuwait

jmirtoska@mail.com

ORCID: 0009-0002-6753-1431
