THE CONCEPTUALIZATION OF AN ABSTRACT NOTION OF DISCOURSE AS A JOURNEY IN SELECTED LEXICAL PHRASES WITH THE NOUN *POINT*

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The major goal of this paper consists in extracting the means of conceptualizing an abstract idea of discourse through the analysis of a set of selected lexical phrases containing the noun *point*. The data were delimited with the help of theories situated within the realm of discourse analysis and text linguistics and were subsequently approached from the standpoint of cognitive linguistics. The experientialist view of linguistic gestalts and metaphor, as formulated by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), provided the framework for analyzing the data. The psychological ideas concerning prototypical organization of conceptual categories, originally developed by Rosch (1973, 1977) and successfully applied to numerous linguistic studies (Lakoff 1987, Langacker 1987, 1991), proved to be of particular use in the analysis.

The lexical phrases constituting the body of data were not chosen at random. Firstly, all of these phrases contain the noun *point*, whose conceptual import makes the phrases markedly interesting from the analytical perspective. Secondly, the choice was determined by a specific theoretical model of discourse adopted here. This model treats discourse as a process, which implies that a "discourse analyst [...] is interested in the function or purpose of a piece of linguistic data and also in how that data are processed, both by the producer and by the receiver" (Brown and Yule 1983: 25). Additionally, discourse is treated as consisting of sequences of communicative occurrences which are interconnected and directed towards one another (Beaugrande and Dressler 1990: 39). The communicative occurrences are in turn defined as utterances adhering to the following seven criteria of textuality:

(1)   cohesion, which refers to relationships holding among lexical elements within an utterance;

(2)   coherence, which refers to a configuration of notions within an utterance;

(3)   intentionality, which refers to willingness of an utterance producer to create a coherent and cohesive utterance;

(4)   acceptability, which refers to a disposition of an utterance receiver to treat an utterance as cohesive and coherent;

(5)   informativeness, which refers to the degree of predictability of an utterance;

(6)   situationality, which refers to the factors rendering the text as fitting a given situation;

(7)   intertextuality, which refers to the factors conditioning the creation of an utterance by the knowledge of another utterance.
        (Beaugrande and Dressler 1990: 19-30)

The above criteria become slightly different in their character when they apply to communicative occurrences comprised by discourse. Cohesion then refers to relationships holding among lexical elements within concurrent communicative occurrences. Coherence of a single communicative occurrence is perceptible only against the background of entire discourse. Intentionality reveals itself in using a conversation for the purpose of attaining a particular goal. Acceptability becomes apparent in immediate feedback. The role of situationality is particularly direct. The organization of the entire discourse is subordinated to intertextuality, and the requirements of informativeness govern the participation in the discourse (Beaugrande and Dressler 1990: 39).

Although the seven criteria function as theoretical constructs, it seems obvious that they are at the same time a part of discourse participants' knowledge, of which the participants are to varying degrees aware. The lexical phrases, used in examples below[1], which make up the body of analyzed data, express judgments of discourse participants concerning the relationship between communicative occurrences and the seven criteria cited above.

a/the starting point
     He took as his starting point the fact that unemployment was on the increase.
                                                                         (Macpherson 1994)

to see a/the point
     He thought the meeting was a waste of time, and I could see his point.
                                                                         (Longman 1995)

the whole point
     But that's the whole point – the richer you are the more you should pay.
                                                                         (Longman 1995)

to take a/the point
     I take your point about that picture. It does look better here.
                                                                         (Longman 1995)

to have a/the point
     Sue thinks it would be better to go by train, and I think she has a point.
                                                                         (Longman 1995)

to a/the point
     The message was short and to the point.
                                                                         (Longman 1995)

to make a point
     John made an interesting point about the role of the artist in society.
                                                                         (Longman 1995)

beside the point
     She's young, but that's beside the point.
                                                                         (Longman 1995)

to come/get to a/the point
     I wish you would get to the point.
     You obviously came here asking for money. Now, come to the point and tell me how much.
                                                                         (Longman 1995)

to miss a/the point
     Was I hearing him right or had I completely missed the point?
                                                                         (Longman 1995)

at this point
     It was at this point[2] the surgeon realized things were going wrong.
                                                                         (Longman 1995)

on a/the point
     There are points on which we have agreed to differ.
                                                                         (OALDCE[3])

to stretch a/the point
     Can't you stretch a point in my favor?
                                                                         (OALDCE)

to strain a/the point
     We've not quite so much proof as I could wish. It would be straining a point to arrest him, as it stands.
                                                                         (OED)

to reach a/the point
     [He] had reached the point where nothing seemed to matter any more.
                                                                         (Longman 1992)

to diverge on a/the point
     On a number of points the two accounts diverge.
                                                                         (Macpherson 1994)

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[1] The sentences exemplifying the use of the analyzed phrases are either quoted after dictionaries (see References) or are the result of native speakers' introspection.

[2] The example apparently illustrates the use of the lexical phrase at this point in reference to time. Discourse, however, being a process unfolding in time, may be naturally referred to by means of a phrase whose primary usage concerns time.

[3] The abbreviations used in the paper are as follows:

OALDCE – *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English*
OED – *The Oxford English Dictionary*

a/the turning point

   The turning point in the controversy came when new evidence was presented.
                                                                    (Macpherson 1994)

off the point

   The student received low marks for his essay, as much of it was off the point.
                                                                       (Wood 1967)

to keep to a/the point

   Don't digress so much. Keep to the point.

                                                                       (Wood 1967)

to arrive at a/the point

   After a long digression, he finally arrived at the point of his dissertation.

a/the point of no return

   As the employee listed his grievances with his boss, he reached the point of no return, and quit then and there.

to wander/stray from a/the point

   We asked Matt about his operation but he quickly began to stray from the point.

to return to a/the point

   No matter how many times the suspect tried to avoid the officer's question, the lieutenant insisted on returning to the point: "Where were you at 8:00 last night?"

what's the point

   What's the point of looking any longer? We've been driving for three hours and we'll never find the house.

what's one's point

   You keep rambling on about switching to a market economy but what's your point?

to get a/the point

   We keep lecturing Peter about his appearance and his mismatched socks but he doesn't get the point.

to raise a/the point

   Steve's father said: "You keep asking me for the car keys but I'd like to raise the point that last weekend you didn't come home".

to overlook a/the point

   The detective reviewed the evidence and realized he overlooked a few key points.

to dwell on a/the point

   The old professor was very pragmatic and dwelled on the point until the whole class understood beyond the shadow of a doubt.

to cover a/the point

   The reporter interviewing the new minister of finance covered every point on the government's new tax proposal.

Most of the lexical phrases seem to express coherence and informativeness of particular communicative occurrences. This seems to be the case with to come to a/the point, to arrive at a/the point, to reach a/the point, to overlook a/the point, to diverge on a/the point, to keep to a/the point, to have a/the point, What is the point? (a question about coherence and informativeness), to a/the point, on a/the point, at a/the point, and That is the whole point. Phrases like to bring up a/the point, to raise a/the point, to make a/the point, to dwell on a/the point, and to cover a/the point turn out to imply that a communicative occurrence may be coherent, but not necessarily informative. As to beside the point, off the point, miss a/the point, and wander from/off/away from a/the point – they appear to comment on the communicative occurrences which are treated either as both incoherent and uninformative or as exclusively uninformative or exclusively incoherent. The phrase to return to a/the point particularly stresses intertextual links between a communicative occurrence and the entire discourse. To see a/the point and to get a/the point signalize that a communicative occurrence has been perceived as acceptable but to strain a/the point and to stretch a/the point reveal that certain communicative occurrences cannot be accepted because of their incoherence with the rest of discourse. To take a/the point indicates positive relationship between a communicative occurrence and the criteria of both acceptability and informativeness.

In the course of the analysis we intend to show how a part of the concept DISCOURSE is understood in terms of a part of the concept JOURNEY. Firstly, we present a model of the structured activity JOURNEY in order to see in what way the particular elements of this activity coded in the analyzed phrases serve the purpose of understanding the concept DISCOURSE.

The concept JOURNEY constitutes an experiential gestalt, i.e. a "complex of properties occurring together [which] is more basic to our experience than their separate occurrence" as a result of "their constant recurrence in our everyday functioning" (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 71). The proposed gestalt JOURNEY, as described below, is in itself an extension of the prototype of causation emergent from direct manipulation. Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 70) offer a model of prototypical causation composed of the following features:

   The agent has as a goal some change of state in the patient.
   The change of state is physical.
   The agent has a "plan" for carrying out this goal.
   The plan requires the agent's use of a motor program.
   The agent is in control of that motor program.
   The agent is primarily responsible for carrying out the plan.
   The agent is the energy source [...], and the patient is the energy goal [...].

The agent touches the patient either with his body or an instrument [...].
The agent successfully carries out the plan.
The change in the patient is perceptible.
The agent monitors the change in the patient through sensory perception.

The gestalt JOURNEY, being an extension of prototypical causation, partly conforms to the model presented above (i.e. shares a number of features with it) and partly diverges from the model (i.e. contains features in its structure that are absent from the model).

JOURNEY

(1) Participants:	The kind of participants are people. They play the role of explorers.
(2) Parts:	Planning the route. Locating a destination. Approaching a destination. Exploring a destination. Leaving a destination.
(3) Stages:	
Beginning:	Departing from the starting point.
Middle:	Arriving at and exploring the particular destinations along the route.
End:	Reaching and exploring the final destination.
(4) Linear Sequence:	Locating a destination after departing from the starting point. Approaching the destination after locating the destination. Exploring the destination after approaching the destination. Leaving the destination after exploring the destination. Locating a destination after leaving the destination. Approaching the destination after locating the destination. etc.
(5) Causation:	Starting with the outset of the journey, moving from one destination to another results in reaching the latter, which in turn results in exploring this destination until the final destination has been reached and explored.
	The exploration of a destination may result in changing the direction of the journey.
(6) Purpose:	Progressing along the route of the journey until reaching and exploring the final destination.

The overlap between the gestalt JOURNEY and the gestalt of prototypical causation is now apparent. The participants of the journey are agents who have a plan, i.e. the route of the journey, which they follow using a motor program for the purpose of successfully carrying out their goal, i.e. progressing along the route until the final destination is reached and explored.

As the internal structure of the gestalt JOURNEY has been revealed, it is now possible to focus on the elements of JOURNEY prominently occurring in the semantic structure of the analyzed lexical phrases referring to discourse. The idea of progressing in a journey, i.e. moving along the route of the journey, is realized by the choice of particular verbs included in a number of lexical phrases subjected to analysis. Thus, the participants of the journey can *come to a/the point, arrive at a/the point, reach a/the point, wander from/off/away from a/the point*, or even *return to a/the point*. The lexical phrases enumerated above elaborate on the middle and/or final stages of the gestalt JOURNEY, and so it is these stages of the gestalt which serve as a source of metaphorical conceptualization of discourse.

Let us for a while diverge from the main line of our argument and focus on the noun *point* as used in all of the expressions cited above. We have already pointed out that discourse is at least partly understood as a journey, which is indicated by the use of verbs referring specifically to movement in space. The use of the noun *point* in reference to discourse is motivated by a different kind of conceptualization, which in certain aspects happens to be coherent with the overall metaphor DISCOURSE IS A JOURNEY.

A dictionary definition states that a point is "a place having definite spatial position, but no extent [...]" (Oxford English Dictionary: 1048). Nevertheless, it seems that the primary (prototypical) usage of the noun *point* signifies a figure viewed against a background anchored in figure/ground distinction, one of cognitively basic human abilities (Langacker 1987: 120-122). The figure/ground distinction may be extended onto abstract domains of human experience. In terms of conceptualizing discourse, it is postulated here that ideas, opinions, thoughts, etc., which are indispensable elements of discourse, are conceived of as figures against the remainder of chaotic and unspecified background of mental activity. The use of the noun *point* in reference to clearly delimited mental activity in a conceptualization of discourse is therefore highly motivated. The figure/ground distinction, when functioning as a factor triggering the conceptualization of discourse, is evident in the lexical phrases *to see a/the point, what's one's point?* and *that's the whole point*, where the noun *point* refers to well-delimited mental entities within the discourse.

The figure/ground distinction-based construal of a point as a mental entity becomes enriched with the application of the so-called ontological metaphors which

are basically devices enabling the speaker to view a wide variety of abstract concepts as concrete entities (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). The metaphors are directional in the sense that concepts derived from the realm of physical experience serve as the means for understanding concepts that are not directly accessible to human perceptual apparatus, such as abstract ideas or emotions.

A point, being not only a dimensionless figure viewed against certain background but also a concrete entity located in three-dimensional space, naturally becomes a vehicle for understanding mental entities as concrete objects. Hence we arrive at an ontological metaphor MENTAL ENTITIES (THOUGHTS, IDEAS, OPINIONS, ETC.) ARE CONCRETE OBJECTS (POINTS) apparent in the following prepositional lexical phrases: *off the point, to the point, beside the point, on that point, at this point.* The use of prepositions in the preceding examples clearly indicates a spatial construal of mental entities referred to as points. The mental entities which have the status of concrete objects (points) are subjected to activities which can be exclusively performed on three-dimensional or even more specifically defined objects:

to get a point	– three-dimensional object
to bring up a point	– three-dimensional object
to raise a point	– three-dimensional object
to take a point	– three-dimensional object
to stretch a point	– three-dimensional and expandable object
to strain a point	– three-dimensional and expandable object
to make a point	– three-dimensional object/artifact
to have a point	– three-dimensional object/commodity

As the above examples show, the metaphor MENTAL ENTITIES (THOUGHTS, IDEAS, OPINIONS, ETC.) ARE CONCRETE OBJECTS (POINTS) becomes specified yielding three cross-coherent metaphors in which mental entities are conceptualized as 1) expandable objects, 2) artifacts, and 3) commodities. Thus, mental entities appear here as an outcome of creative activity - an artifact (cf. *to make a point*). The artifact, whose form can be changed (cf. *to stretch a point, to strain a point*), may have a certain value (cf. *to have a point*) and can be presented to somebody with the intention of being accepted (cf. *to take a point, to get a point*). These metaphors focus on the role of discourse participants in creating, shaping, making use of and exchanging mental entities. The emergence of the aforementioned metaphors seems to be motivated by the overlap between the domain of abstract experience and the domain of experience immediately accessible to our sensory perception. Summing up, mental entities (ideas, thoughts, opinions, etc.) become conceptualized as three-dimensional concrete objects with varying degree of specificity concerning their physical properties via directional ontological metaphors. Therefore, discourse, of which these entities are a part, may in this case become construed in spatial terms as well.

Let us now return to our discussion of the metaphor DISCOURSE IS A JOURNEY. In terms of the gestaltive JOURNEY the noun *point* seems to correspond to one of its elements, namely a single destination. Progressing in a journey involves physical movement of the participants in space from one destination to another. Destinations in a journey constitute areas clearly delimited in space which stand in sharp opposition to the remainder of the space. The delimitation consists in conceptual foregrounding of the destination area against a background by the participant/s of the journey who, again, employ the experientially based ability of figure/ground organization.

It is now time to have a closer look at the way in which the idea of progress inherent in journeys has been extended onto an abstract idea of discourse. As we have already pointed out, understanding discourse as being a journey involves being able to perceive the concept DISCOURSE in terms of a part of multidimensional structure of the concept JOURNEY. Making use of both non-metaphorical and metaphorical entailments we will presently concentrate upon what progressing in a journey involves in order to establish structural correspondences between the conceptualization of a journey and the conceptualization of a discourse. The correspondences will enable us to attest the coherence of the structural metaphor DISCOURSE IS A JOURNEY.

(1) non-metaphorical entailment: A journey has a starting point.
    metaphorical entailment: Discourse has a starting point.

    a/the starting point

(2) non-metaphorical entailment: In a journey, the participants locate a destination.
    metaphorical entailment: In discourse, the participants locate a mental entity (a point).

    to see a/the point
    to overlook a/the point

(3) non-metaphorical entailment: In a journey, the participants approach a destination.
    metaphorical entailment: In discourse, the participants approach a mental entity (a point).

    to come/get to a/the point
    to arrive at a/the point
    to reach a/the point
    to miss a/the point

(4) non-metaphorical entailment: In a journey, the participants explore a destination.
    metaphorical entailment: In discourse, the participants explore a mental entity (a point).

to dwell on/upon a/the point
to cover a/the point[4]

(5) non-metaphorical entailment:	In a journey, the exploration of a destination may result in changing the direction of the journey.
metaphorical entailment:	In discourse, the exploration of a mental entity (a point) may result in changing the direction of the discourse.

a/the turning point

(6) non-metaphorical entailment:	In a journey, the participants leave a destination.
metaphorical entailment:	In discourse, the participants leave a mental entity (a point).

to wander from/off/away from a/the point
to diverge on a/the point

The motivation behind the emergence of the metaphor DISCOURSE IS A JOURNEY follows from the fact that both discourse and journey are structured activities. Both activities involve the presence of the same kind of participants, namely people. In the case of journeys, the participants progress in performing the roles characteristic of this activity both in time and in space, whereas in the case of discourse the progress unfolds solely in time. This apparent incoherence in fact triggers the understanding of discourse as a journey, as conceptualizing time in spatial terms turns out to be deeply rooted in Western culture (Langacker 1987: 148).

As the entailments (1)-(6) show, discourse is primarily conceptualized in terms of the second element in the gestalt JOURNEY, namely in terms of Parts. As a corollary, the participants of the activity discourse are able to locate, approach, explore, and leave points which correspond to particular destinations in a journey and which have been metaphorically extended onto the realm of discourse and are used to refer to mental entities of the type thoughts, ideas, opinions, etc. The fourth element of the gestaltive JOURNEY, i.e. Linear Sequence, has also been extended onto the concept of discourse. In journeys, the particular parts (Locating a destination, Approaching a destination, Exploring a destination, and Leaving a destination) result from one another (Causation) and take place in space and time. The employment of the aforementioned parts in structuring the concept of discourse allows to retain their successive order in the metaphorical construal of discourse due to the mode of causation

characterizing these parts in journeys. The sequence of these parts in journey is based on time and space (linear sequence), and was extended on discourse, characterizable in terms of time only (temporal sequence), through the metaphorical construal of time as space.

Mental entities in discourse are to a certain extent viewed as destinations to be explored (cf. *to dwell on/upon a/the point* and *to cover a/the point*) in accordance with the metaphor DISCOURSE IS A JOURNEY but on this level they are also conceptualized as specific types of objects mentioned above (i.e. expandable objects, commodities, and artifacts) through the use of the noun *point*.

The overall metaphor employed to partly structure and understand the abstract concept of discourse extracted from the analysis of the lexical phrases with the noun *point* has the form DISCOURSE IS A JOURNEY. The metaphor of journey turned out to be applicable to the analysis of a more specific mode of discourse, namely argument (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). The structural metaphor DISCOURSE IS A JOURNEY proves internally consistent as it makes use of a considerable portion of the gestalt JOURNEY and, retaining the relationships holding among the parts of this portion, projects it onto the abstract concept of discourse. Through the application of the metaphor DISCOURSE IS A JOURNEY, the concept of discourse is understood in terms of progression and space. The spatial construal of discourse additionally follows from the application of an auxiliary ontological metaphor MENTAL ENTITIES (THOUGHTS, IDEAS, OPINIONS, ETC.) ARE CONCRETE OBJECTS (POINTS). This metaphor is built around the noun *point* and enables the participants of discourse to view mental entities as concrete objects. Both the ontological metaphor and the structural metaphor DISCOURSE IS A JOURNEY are cross-coherent through the application of the noun *point*, whose prototypical use motivates its extended usages in reference both to locations in space, i.e. destinations in a journey and to mental entities understood as concrete objects characterizable in terms of specific properties.

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[4] In a journey, the participants typically move along the route covering the ground with their footsteps. Therefore, the route of the journey appears to them as a surface rather than just a line (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 90, Lakoff 1987: 429). This mode of construing the route, of which the particular destinations are a part and along which they are located, motivates the use of the verb *to cover* in reference to the exploration part of the gestalt JOURNEY serving to structure the concept of discourse. As the destinations in a journey are viewed as surfaces to be explored by covering, their abstract counterparts in discourse, i.e. mental entities referred to as *points*, can also be explored by the participants of discourse through covering.

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