

**Prospection, Cataphora and Evaluative Cohesion:
From Discourse Organisation to Corpora and Back Again**

Tread softly because you tread on my dreams (W.B. Yeats)

Part 1: The theoretical challenges

Two traditional focuses

First, corpus discourse studies has traditionally emphasised retrospective patterning, in particular anaphoric referencing (from Halliday and Hasan 1976 to Hoey 2017) i.e. that meaning emerges from previous co-text, and the job of the discourse analyst is to look back to discover how the current utterance has acquired its meaning.

However, as Sinclair argues (1990/2004) the cataphoric (Gr: ‘forward-carrying’) or prospective (Lat. ‘forward-looking’) dimension to discourse studies has been much neglected. Discourse building as well as discourse interpreting also works prospectively: lexical priming (both general and local recent, intertextual priming) cataphorically activates expectations. Semantic, including evaluative, frames are set up in advance and as we proceed through a discourse. Prospection guides interpretation, as Sinclair stresses we generally do not need to anaphorically (Gr, ‘backward carrying) flick back through pages, we are too busy working out what is about to come, how the discourse will wind up and how cohesive overall it will be. Prospection is the true driving force of discourse.

Second, evaluative cohesion is the lonely, long-overlooked sibling of the justly much celebrated, admired, courted notion of propositional cohesion (Halliday and Hasan 1976, Halliday & Matthiessen 2004/2014). If, as in Hoey’s excellent simile ‘ideas are like people. They have direct ancestors and share genes with their siblings. [...] they can become surrounded by ideas they have given birth to’ (2017), then evaluative cohesion is the Cinderella of discourse analysis, who never even got invited to the Ball. Even Sinclair’s celebrated example of prospection - ‘the implications are daunting’ - clearly carries negative evaluation. The novelties I wish to propose here are (a) that evaluation functions not just locally but is also a principle of whole-text organisation (as in Problem-Solution, Contrast, Cause and Consequence [as in our epigraph] and Crescendo) and that (b) in real-life discourse, cataphora is much more varied, complex, engaging, even powerful than is usually described. If anything, it is anaphora who is the poor relation.

This abstract itself is an example of Sinclair’s prospection and how cataphora pushes discourse forward (Partington 2025, Unit 8) when we revive another ‘Cinderella’ motif in Part 2, where ideas can be humans, in a discussion of the metaphor of ‘fleshing out’ of an idea/theory even a mechanical invention (enTenTen21).

Part 2 (highly provisional). I wish to suggest ways to (a) rebalance backward and forward discourse analysis and (b) pay evaluative cohesion its due respect.

With reference to two spoken texts of very different discourse types, a popular song and a political speech, I intend to discuss how both cohere evaluatively, although using different mechanisms, the first a ‘garden path’, the second, a Problem-Solution and a circular structure, both relying heavily on evaluative lexical chains (Partington & Diegoli 2026). I then want to show how simple corpus linguistics (and CaDS) techniques can not only give added value to analysis of particular discourses, but provide insights into how evaluation itself in discourse can be far more complex than imagined.

A concluding reflection, time permitting. Prospection presupposes patterned forward-oriented co-selection and contemporary large language models—trained on data-banks an order of magnitude bigger than any corpus—provide indirect evidence of its statistical reality. Their predictive capacities rest precisely on the large-scale distributional regularities that corpus linguistics has long sought to describe. And what is more, their ability to interact dialogically with humans, interpreting questions and producing replies, is a vindication both of Sinclair’s insight into how discourse functions as well as the existence of evaluative alongside propositional cohesion (Partington 2017).

References

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