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# Beyond the Sentence

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Abstract

In modern linguistics, the sentence has often been described as the largest grammatical units, from the point of view of Systemic Functional Linguistics. This is because grammatical units are ranked with the sentence occupying the apex; and the morpheme occupying the bottom of the grammatical ladder. Before the sentence comes the clause; and after the morpheme is the word. The group or what is traditionally called the phrase is the median grammatical unit. However, since we usually talk in larger units, even above the sentence, the question remains: what is beyond the sentence? In this paper, an attempt is made to answer that question.

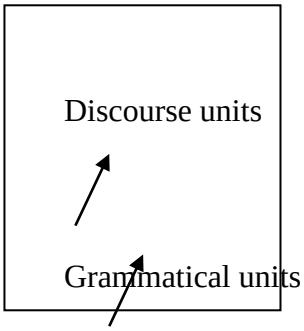
**Keywords**: Grammatical units, discourse units, rank, text, rank scale

## 1. Introduction

*"What is beyond the sentence"?* According to Adejare (1996:55) "this remains an issue in linguistics for which no satisfactory answer has yet been offered". Yes, answering that question is not easy. In this paper, an attempt will be made to answer this question by looking into discourse ***units***, the units of text above the sentence. First, unlike phonology and grammar, discourse units are not derivatives of substance. Significantly, the tangible component of language, linguistic substance, subdivides into ***phonic*** substance of sounds of speech (phonology) and ***graphic*** substance of signs of written texts (grammar).Thus, both grammatical units and phonological units are subsumed under the discourse units. Returning to the question above, one answer which readily comes to mind, especially when one reverts to the written language, is the paragraph. Communicatively, the paragraph seems to be the unit directly above the sentence. But, this seemingly appropriate answer is unsatisfactory for

the obvious reasons. First, the structure of paragraphs is not always predictable; it may be a single sentence as it is in journalese or multiple sentences as it is the case with legalese. Second, the length of a paragraph is person-oriented and language user-determined. Consequently, what is logically beyond the sentence is, not semantic, but formal units (Adejare & Adejare 1996). Sinclair &Coulthard (1992) call these formal units the discourse units. These units are the constituents of both spoken and written texts. All told, a text is comprised of both the lower level of grammatical units, and the higher level of discourse units, as diagrammed in (1)

1 Text




The grammatical units are comprised of the Sentence (S), the Clause (K), the Group (G), the word (W) and the Morpheme (M), arranged from the largest to the lowest unit, in that order, on grammatical rank scale. The focus of this paper is with the discourse units making up a text. The paper is arranged this way. After this introduction, the next section explains the relationship among the terms *units, rank* and *rank scale.* Next, I look into discourse units and discourse rank scale in details with relevant examples. Following that, I briefly examine the state of the canonical discourse units and rank scale. Then, I conclude.

## 1. Units, Rank, and Rank Scale

Discourse units are the units of discourse, much like grammatical units, arranged according to their hierarchy or rank. The term **rank** and **rank scale** date back to Michael Alexander Kirkwood Halliday's (1961)"Categories of the Theory of Grammar", a foundational work on Systemic Functional Linguistics, the school of linguistic theory and description which considers *systems* as a key organising feature of grammar. The idea of rank by Halliday is

better captured in his own words, *"rank defines an inner series of strata, or sub-strata, within the outer grammatical stratum, with each rank characterized by a different network of systems"* (Halliday, 1966, p. 66). Observe that rank operates in a stratum, stage, scale or hierarchy. Thus, a rank is made up of systems within systems or a chain of systems, underscoring the need for a rank scale. Defining the term rank scale and differentiating it from rank, Halliday & Matthiessen (2014) say that:

> [rank scale refers to] a hierarchy of units, related by constituency…and … each step in the hierarchy... We refer to such a hierarchy of units, related by constituency, as a **rank scale**, and to each step in the hierarchy as one **rank** [square bracket, mine].p.5

It means then that ranks arranged on a linguistic scale, grammatical or otherwise, according to their hierarchy, realise a rank scale. Halliday (1961, p. 261) explains the derivation of the hierarchy thus: "by reference to the rank scale, **classes** are derived "from above" (or "downwards") and not "from below" (or "upwards")." This means that a higher rank is realised by a lower one. Halliday's conception of rank and rank scale informed Sinclair and Coultahrd's discourse rank and discourse rank scale. Sinclair and Coulthard (1992) explain the matter this way:

> We decided to use a *rank scale* for our descriptive model because of its flexibility. The major advantage of describing new data with a rank scale is that no rank has more importance than any other and thus if, as we did, one discovers new patterning, it is a fairly simple process to create a new rank to handle it. The basic assumption of a rank scale is that a unit at a given rank, for example, *word,* is made up of one or more units of the rank below, *morpheme,* and combines with other units at the same rank to make one unit at the rank above, *group* (Halliday 1961).
>
> The unit at the lowest rank has no structure. For example, in grammar 'morpheme' is the smallest unit, and cannot be subdivided into smaller grammatical units. However, if one

> moves from the *level* of grammar to the level of phonology, morphemes can be shown to be composed of a series of phonemes. Similarly, the smallest unit at the level of discourse will have no structure, although it is composed of words, groups or clauses at the level of grammar.p.2

It is clear from the above that discourse units, just as I conceived of them in (1) above are the units below the text and above the grammatical units within the units of text-form. The highest unit of discourse is the maximal projection of the lowest unit of grammar. Conversely, the highest unit of grammar is a constituent of the lowest unit of discourse or discourse unit.

## 2. Discourse Units and Discourse Rank Scale

Early in their conception of what constitutes the discourse units, Sinclair &Coulthard (1992) first identified two discourse units: *utterance* (everything a speaker says before another speaker speaks), and *exchange* (two or more utterances). The division soon became problematic when the duo realised that there can be, not just 2 but up to 3 or more utterances in a discourse as in (2).

T: Can you tell me why do you eat all that food? Yes.
P: To keep you strong.

T: To keep you strong. Yes. To keep you strong. Why do you want to be strong?

- Sinclair &Coulthard (1992, pp. 2, 3)

Observe that in (2), after the middle of the teacher's second utterance which serves as the boundary, more words still exist; and this is not just an isolated case. So, the question is, how does one categorise discourse units such as these? Examples like these and more called for a review of their position and made the duo to finally come up with five discourse units comprising, perhaps, in order of prominence as denoted by number 1 (most prominent) to 5 (least prominent). These five I have called the canonical (orthodox) discourse units/discourse rank scale. For ease of identification, I have diagrammed the units in (in (3) below:

| | |
|---|---|
| Lesson | 1 |
| Transaction | 2 |
| Exchange | 3 |
| Move | 4 |
| Act | 5 |

The Canonical Discourse Units and Rank Scale (Sinclair and Coulthard, 1992)

Each of the units is ranked according to its status from top of the scale. It seems that the numbering against each unit indicates the level of prominence or size from 1 (most prominent/largest) to 5 (least prominent/smallest).In turn, each ranked unit has its elements of structure, a structure and exponent class member, usually, of a lower unit realizing it. In table in (3), an example of the complexity of the unit operation is presented using *Transaction*, a second-ranked unit from the top.

RANK II: Transaction

| *Elements of structure* | *Structures* | *Classes of exchange* |
|---|---|---|
| Preliminary (P)<br>Medial (M)<br>Terminal (T) | PM ($M^2$ . . . $M^n$) (T) | P, T: Boundary (II.1)<br>M: Teaching (II.2) |

Sinclair and Coulthard (1992

This table says it all. First, it identifies the rank, TRANSACTION, a second unit (from the top of the scale as indicated by II), as the unit under discussion. Next, the table states that the rank has three elements of structure, **P** (reliminary), **M** (edial), and **T** (erminal), constituting its exponence. The next column then provides the composite structural formula PM (**$M^2$… Mn**) (**T**), with PM realising the obligatory elements and the other bracketed optional elements**.** Specifically, the formula can be formalised thus:

(a) A transaction must have a preliminary **P** move; and a media **M** move

(b) There may be any number of from 2 to infinity,

(c) A terminal move, an outsider, as I will call it, is allowed but its presence is not obligatory.

In the third and final column, the table specifies that transactional elements realising the structure are derivatives of classes of a lower rank, **exchange**. Observe that each element is realized by a unique class of exchange. If the exchanges are either **P**, **T** or both, then, they must be selected from the same class of move called **Boundary** moves. However, if the exchange elements are **M,** then, they must belong to a class of exchange called **Teachi**ng.

In what follows, I present the whole rank as originally presented by Sinclair and Coulthard (1992) and Osisanwo (2003), with relevant examples. In keeping steps with the practice operative in Systemic Linguistics, Osisanwo (2003, p. 17) suggests two possible ways of analysis. The analyst may "start from the topmost unit "Lesson" and treat them in descending order down to act"; or " start from the smallest or lowest unit on the rank scale and move up in hierarchical order to the highest unit on the rank – "Lesson". Following Osisanwo (2003), I begin from the lowest unit, **Act**.

### 3.1. ACT

**Acts** are the lowest and smallest units of the discourse rank-scale with the functional properties of indicating what the speaker is using the item for. According to Osisanwo (2003, 17), acts are "not divisible just as the grammatical unit "morpheme" is not divisible". Acts are created through grammatical units[1].An act can be a word, a group, a clause or a sentence. Hence, "all four sentence types" – declarative, interrogative, imperative and moodless – can realise an act, as shown in texts 1-3.

Text 1

Audu: two plus one (a group))

Amaka: Three (a word)

Text 2

Okemute: What are you doing? (An interrogative sentence)

BJ: I am presenting a paper on discourse rank-scale (a declarative sentence)

Text 3

Edet: Let's go now (imperative sentence

[1]As we shall see in this paper, Act is not the smallest unit of text form

Oghene: The door (moodless sentence)

Sinclair and Coulthard (1992) identify three major acts, viz, *elicitation* acts, *directive* acts and *informative* acts. Elicitation acts are always realized by questions, directive acts by commands, and informative acts by statements. This is captured in the diagram below:

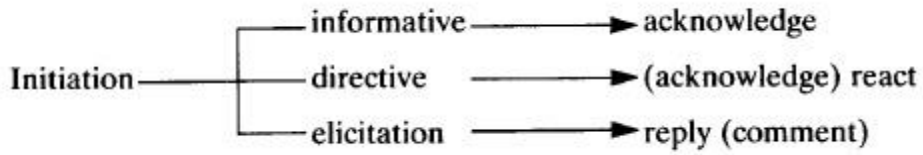



**Figure 1: Major Acts: Sinclair and Coulthard (1992).**

All three occur as the heads of initiating moves in the classroom. As indicated in the diagram, informative lends itself to acknowledge, a verbal or non-verbal signal confirming that the interlocutor is listening or has understood the speaker. If the act is directive, the interlocutor *react*(s) by performing whatever action is required by the directive. Finally, an elicitation requires a *reply*, which often, is one word moodless items. They can also be statements. Optionally, hence in bracket, a reply can be followed by a comment which is intended to exemplify, expand, justify, or provide additional information

I consider each below.

*i.* *Elicitation*: An elicitation act usually serves as an initiating question. The purpose of

such a question is to gain a verbal response from the communicatee(s) or interlocutor(s) as exemplified in texts 4 and 5

Text 4

Teacher: What is the capital of Lagos State?

Student: Ikeja. (moodless item)

Text 4

Teacher: What about Nigeria

Student: I think it's Abuja. (A statement, providing an additional information about an imperfect state of the interlocutor's knowledge)

At times though, a speaker may begin with a question which appears to have been intended as an elicitation, changes his mind mid discourse and relegates it to a starter; and again relegates this and then introduces another elicitation, which generates another elicitation as in text 5

Text 5

**Husband**: What about going to Lagos? Going to Lagos will be great. Darling, what do you think?

**Wife**: Do you really want to go to Lagos? I think Abuja is better.

The wife initiates and then provides reply that expands on her initiation, an interrogative. The point is this: while speaking, the speaker generally produces a series of statements, questions and commands in a given *situation*. If the speaker allows the interlocutor to respond, then there has been an initiating, as well as the discourse value of informative, elicitation and directive. However, if the teacher immediately, before the interlocutor responds, follows one of these clause types with another, he automatically relegates the earlier clause or pushes it down to act as a starter. The process can go on and on (Sinclair and Coulthard, 1992). This is more like turn-taking in discourse. So, elicitation usually comes in the form of a question requiring an answer. As Osisanwo (2003) observes, elicitation act is characteristic of police interrogation, an aspect of forensic linguistics.

*ii.* *Directive Acts*: These are acts that request actions on the part of the addressees.

The unmarked forms of directive acts are mainly the imperatives. Even so, declarative, moodless and interrogative clauses are also participants as seen in text 6.

Text 6.

Driver: shut the door, please. (Imperative clause)

Commuter: Why are you commanding me? (Interrogative clause)

Drive: Sorry (moodless clause)

Acknowledge may also serve as part of the response to a directive. It shows that the interlocutor has heard. Text 7 is a teacher pupil relationship where acknowledge is necessary.

Text 7

T: Jire, I wonder if you could move to the front of the class.

P: Yes/mm/sure/a nod.

*iii.* *Informative Acts*: "The main function of the informative act", says Osisanwo (2003,

p. 18) is to give information or ideas to the discourse participant(s)". Or, as Coulthard (1977, p. "'to provide information'". Hence, informative acts are information carriers. There use can be compared to the broadcasting method used by the Biblical ancient Israelite farmers. Such

information may be relayed in the form of commands, questions or statements. This means then that the opening move will begin with an informative act and can but does not necessarily need to be followed by a reply by the interlocutor.

According to Osisanwo (2003, p. 18), "Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) propose …twenty forms of act" in addition to the three major acts above. They are

- Marker – starter-elicitation- check
- Directive-informative- prompt – clue
- Cue- bid- nomination – acknowledge
- Reply- loop- react- comment
- Reply- metastatement- conclusion-- aside

3.2. **MOVE**

Osisanwo (2003, p. 21) defines a move as "the single minimal contribution of a participant in a talk at once." Moves can be simple or complex. we provide some examples in texts 8 and 9.

Text 8

Alexander: Tochukwu, can I have my money now? (simple move)

Tochukwu: I don't have money.

Text 9

**Alexander**: (knocking at the door) Tochukwu! Tochukwu! I'm here for my money today. And let me tell you, no room for excuses. In fact, I am not leaving here without my money.(complex move)

**Tochukwu**: Alright. You'll have it.

The move in text 8 is called a simple move whereas the one in 9 is called a complex one. A Simple move has only one act. A complex move on the other hand has more than one act.

It logically follows from the examples above that a move is larger than an act and it is realised by one or more acts. It also stands to reason that whereas a move can be an act; not all acts are equal to a move. Sinclair and Coulthard (1992, p.21 ) are probably referring to this point when they argue that acts are the constituents of moves; and moves make up exchange. They identify five classes of moves realising two classes of exchange. *"Boundary exchanges* are realized by *Framing* and *Focusing* and *Teaching exchanges* by *Opening, Answering*, and *Follow-up moves*." These five constitute the structure and help bring into focus the functions of moves in a discourse.

### 3.2.1 Framing and Focusing Boundary Exchange

The two sub-moves, Framing and Focusing realise Boundary exchange. The Framing move has as its elements of structure, *signal (s)* and an obligatory *head (h*), realising an *(s) h*structure, where h is obligatory and (s) is optional. The linguistic signal is otherwise called the *framer* or *intonation contour*. While it is necessary, it is not entirely sufficient for a transaction boundary. Framing is realised by a closed-class system, such as '*Ok', (all) right, anyway* and so on. Some examples are provided in texts 10

Text 10

**Muhammed**: Next semester, we shall present our topics (focusing)

But first, we must pass all remedial courses (framing)

Text 11

**Teacher**: Today, we will learn about the monster with one eye (framing

First, we must revise what we learned last week. Well, not point by point, though.

### 3.2.2. Opening, Answering, and Follow-up Teaching Exchange

The three sub-moves realise the teaching exchange. Following Osisanwo (2003), I treat opening and answering together; and treat follow-up differently.

*Opening Move and Answering Move:* This move is used to ask a question, make a request, supply information or issue a directive. It is found conversation initially. It is followed by the answering move, which is a reply to it. At times, an answering move may have two parts with one functioning as *head* and the other as *post-head*. Examples are provided in text 12

Text 12

**Passenger**: can I have my ₦ 100 change? (Opening)

**Conductor**: Yes, you can. But, the N100 I have here is turn (answering/post-head)

**Passenger**: Let me have it like that. (Response to post-head)

*Follow-Up Move*: This is the verdict or the feedback to the answering move. It is the barometer for deciding whether the answering move is correct or wrong as indicated in

Text 13

**Bode**: What year was Nigeria amalgamated?

**Jimoh**: 1914

Bode: Good (follow-up)

3.3. **EXCHANGE**

This is the third discourse unit. An exchange is realised by a number of moves. It is usually comprised of an initiation, a response, and a follow-up, as in text 14'

Text 14

**Jemimah**: Good morning Yetty.

**Yetty**: How are you?

Jemimah: I am fine, and you ?

**Yetty**: I am fine too.

There are **free** exchange (that stands alone and does not depend on any other), **bound** exchange (when a variant of the same word is used), **opening** exchange, **medial** exchange, and **closing** exchange.

3.4. **TRANSACTION AND LESSON**

Transactions are made up of exchanges. Lessons are made up of transactions. Thus, lessons are the highest ranked discourse units. The last two discourse units, transaction and lesson are treated together. First, they are both classroom related and do not necessarily have much application in general discourse study. No normal conversation has lesson as one of its structure. Transaction is outside of text because it describes physical linguistic event (Adejare & Adejare, 1996). Osisanwo (2003, p. 24) adds that "lessons do not constitute the structure of any other discourse unit. A classroom lesson is wholistic and not relevant to other discourse genres. Whereas lessons are made up of transactions; transactions are realised by exchanges. Transaction signals are ***well, right, now, good.*** These are also called frames and do not retain their usual meaning in discourse contexts. Frames are used by teacher to indicate the end of a transaction and the beginning of a new one. He can also end signal the beginning of a conversation with a conclusion, a comment or an evaluation (Sinclair and Coulthard, 1992; Osisanwo, 2003). I provide examples in text 15.

Text 15

**Teacher**: What is the plural of man?

**Pupil**: mens

Teacher: Are you sure? Class, what do you think?

Pupils: (silence)

Teacher: Yes, Clara?

Clara: men

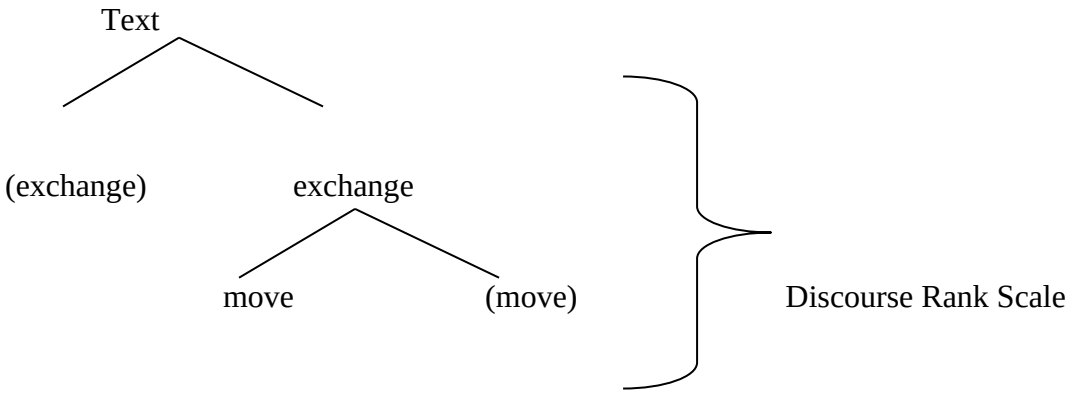
Teacher: Good.

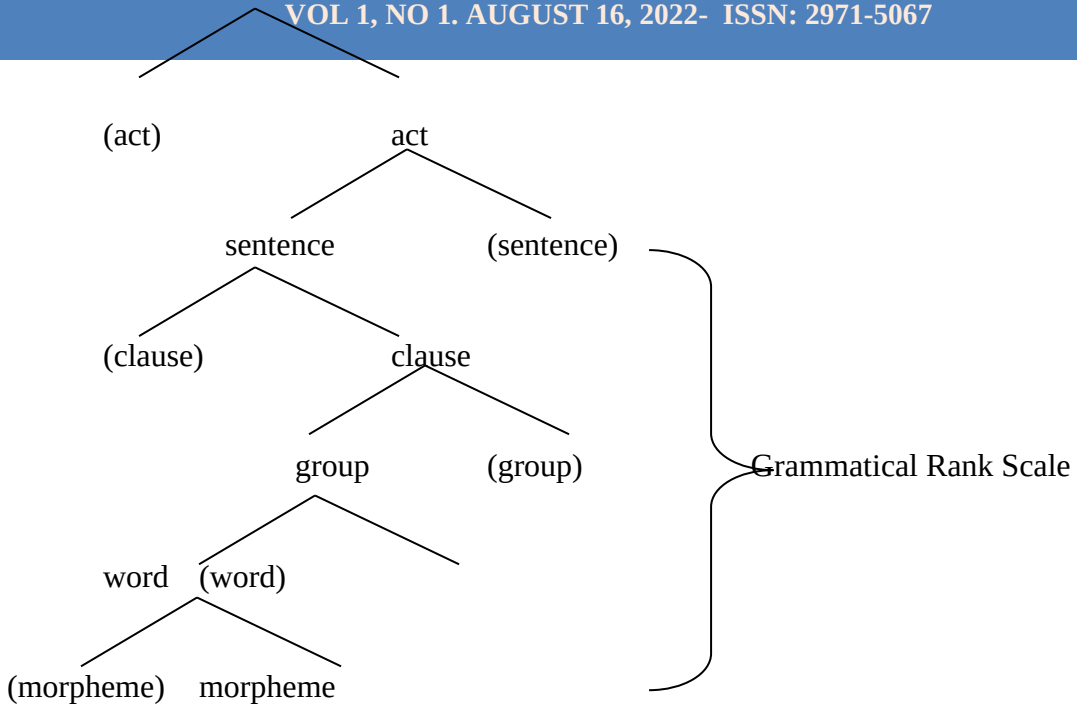
In sum, this is the total gamut of the canonical discourse units and discourse rank-scale by Sinclair and Coulthard (1977, 1992). As explained in the conclusion, the canonical view has been challenged and appropriately refined.

**Beyond the Canonical Discourse Rank Scale**

The discourse units and rank-scale proposed by Sinclair and Coulthard have been useful, especially for classroom analysis and writing conferences (see Haneda, 2004, Gee 2011). However, scholars such as Osisanwo (2003) and Adejare & Adejare (1996) have felt the need for a revision . Osisanwo as we have seen proposes the fusion of lesson and transaction as a unit since they occur simultaneously in a classroom. He observed that they have no relevance in other linguistic activities beyond the classroom. Hence, he is in a way suggesting that discourse units can be without the two.

Osisanwo's stand is not so much different from Adejare and Adejare (1996). First, the duo reasons that since transaction describes physical linguistic event while text is an abstraction, this unit should be done away with. In addition, as far as they are concerned, the unit lesson has no place in true discourse study. At variance with Osisanwo (2003), they observe, and curiously so, that discourse does not operate in isolation from grammar. Hence, they propose merging grammatical units with discourse units as the units of the text form, text being the largest unit of discourse form (Halliday, 1966; Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004; 2014; Adejare & Adejare, 1996). Thus, discourse operates under text. I am in good company with these scholars. Therefore, one can say that the text form has nine members diagrammed below:






**Discourse Units of Text Form (adapted from Adejare & Adejare 1996)**

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, we return to the question raised at the outset, *what is beyond the sentence*? There is no question about it; it is the discourse unit, properly modified to be four in number: *text*, *exchange*, *move* and *act*, in that order, according to their size and rank from the largest to the least. The highest unit of discourse is the maximal projection of the lowest unit of grammar. Conversely, the highest unit of grammar is a constituent of the lowest unit of discourse or discourse unit. Put differently, the discourse rank scale is superordinate to grammatical rank scale but the former is realised by the latter; and, together they make up the units of text form or discourse units.

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