

# **A STUDY OF COHESION AND COHERENCE IN FACEBOOK DISCOURSE**

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## **Abstract**

This research is a study of cohesion and coherence in social media discourse assembling its primary data from Facebook. The advent of ICT has become an integral part of everyday discourse in the modern world. Therefore, the ability of a single village of users from all over the world to communicate and understand one another without saying much lies in discourse analysis, particularly through cohesion and coherence. The data for this research is drawn from a random selection of five Facebook posts, two from a Facebook group known as 'Tales of a Nigerian' and three from personal Facebook accounts. This study reveals that Facebook users employ various cohesive devices and features of coherence to create meaningful and connected online discourse. The findings show the pattern in which reference and repetition as well as inference and logical ordering are used to connect what a user says in a sentence with what has already been said in previous sentences, and how comments are the referents of the entire post. This research, therefore, contributes to the understanding of cohesive links, shared experiences and the Nigerian situation, as tools for the creation and interpretation of online discourse.

## **Introduction/Background to the Study**

Developments in digitisation have dramatically changed how people communicate with each other as well as the discourse practices they engage in as they do this. Digital technologies in the words of Jones *et al.* (2015, p.1), have 'given rise to a host of new ways for people to communicate, manage social relationships, and get things done'. The ways in which people 'get things done' in the digital world is through their use of language, images, voice, etc. The possibilities of digital communication, thus, create new forms of social interactions, new types of texts, as well as new ways in which people use language in their everyday lives as they become competent in using new digital practices. For example, Herring (2013), examines computer-mediated discourse, focusing on online language as a social behaviour. Therefore, social media platforms such as Facebook, X(Twitter), YouTube, and Instagram are examples of digitally mediated discourse. Paltridge (2006, p.24) observes that 'a key notion in the area of discourse analysis is the concept of discourse community.' Swales (2016), more recently, has added two further features to his definition of discourse communities. A discourse community, he argues, develops a sense of 'silential relation' (Becker 1995), in that there are things that do not need to be said or spelt out between members of the group. Discourse communities may consist of close-knit networks of members such as writers of poetry, and their readers, or loose-knit groups of members such as advertising producers and consumers, as well as contributors to online discussion boards. In social media discourse, conversations are debates in society or within social groups that a large number of people recognise, in terms of what sides there are to take in such debates and what sorts of people tend to be on each side.

A further kind of community is what Gee (2004) terms 'affinity spaces'. An affinity space is a place where people come together because of a strong and shared interest in a common activity and where informal learning is a common outcome. In these spaces, people connect with each other based primarily 'on shared activities, interests and goals, not shared race, class, culture, ethnicity or gender' (Gee 2004, p.67). These spaces often occur online such as is the case with fan fiction groups, music, personal accounts, or other areas of interest. Consequently, discourse analysis has evolved to include, not only the relationship between language, and the social and cultural context in which it is used, but also the dynamic changes of 'talk or conversations' used in online communities. This research explores the semantic relationships that exist between Facebook posts, comments and comments' replies which are a connection of strings of ideas, thoughts and opinions in a discourse community.

### **The Meaning of Discourse and Discourse Analysis**

The term 'discourse analysis' was first used by the sentence linguist, Zellig Harris, in his 1952 article entitled 'Discourse Analysis'. According to him, discourse analysis is a method for the analysis of connected speech or writing, for continuing descriptive linguistics beyond the limit of a simple sentence at a time (Harris, 1952). Indeed, scholars have attested to the difficulty in coming up with a comprehensive and acceptable definition for discourse analysis. However, a way to simplify the attempt to define discourse analysis is to say that discourse analysis is the analysis of discourse. The next question, therefore, would be 'what is discourse?' Discourse can simply be seen as language in use (Brown and Yule, 1983; Cook, 1989). It therefore follows that discourse analysis is the analysis of language in use. By 'language in use', we mean the set of norms, preferences and expectations which relate language to context. Discourse analysis can also be seen as the organisation of language above the sentence level. The term 'text' is, sometimes, used in place of 'discourse'. Kamalu and Osisanwo (2015) notes that 'the concern of discourse analysis is not restricted to the study of formal properties of language; it also takes into consideration what language is used for in social and cultural context.' Discourse analysis, therefore, studies the relationship between language (written, spoken – conversation, institutionalized forms of talk) and the contexts in which it is used. What matters is that the text is felt to be coherent.

Cook (1989, pp. 6-7) describes discourse as language in use or language used to communicate something felt to be coherent which may, or may not correspond to a correct sentence or series of correct sentences. Discourse analysis, therefore, according to him, is the search for what gives discourse coherence. He posits that discourse does not have to be grammatically correct, can be anything from a grunt or simple expletive, through short conversations and scribbled notes, a novel or a lengthy legal case. What matters is not its conformity to rules, but the fact that it communicates and is recognised by its receivers as coherent. Similarly, Stubbs (1983, p.1) perceives discourse analysis as 'a conglomeration of attempts to study the organisation of language and therefore to study larger linguistic units such as conversational exchanges or written text.' Again, we affirm that what matters in the study of discourse, whether as language in use or as language beyond the clause, is that language is organised in a coherent manner such that it communicates something to its receivers. Apart from these definitions, other scholars such as Candlin and McCarthy, have contributed to the definition of discourse and discourse analysis. Candlin (1997, p.IX) posits that 'discourse refers to language in use, as a process which is socially situated. However we may go on to discuss the constructive and dynamic role of either spoken or written discourse

in structuring areas of knowledge, and the social and institutional practices, which are associated with them. In this sense, discourse is a means of talking and writing about, and acting upon worlds, a means which both constructs and is constructed by a set of social practices within these worlds'. In defining discourse analysis, McCarthy (1991,p.5) says:

Discourse analysis is concerned with the study of the relationship between language and the context in which it is used. It grew out of work in different disciplines in the 1960s and early 1970s, including linguistics, semiotics, psychology, and anthropology and sociology. Discourse analysts study language in use: written text of all kinds and spoken data from conversation to highly institutionalised forms of talk.

### **The Meaning of Cohesion and Coherence**

Cohesion and coherence are two distinguished linguistic terms in discourse analysis. Though they share the same morpheme 'cohere', they are different. Scholars define and classify them from various aspects. Cohesion and coherence were first studied by Halliday and Hasan (1976). They take the view that the primary determinant of whether sets of sentences do or do not constitute a text depends on cohesive relationships within and between the sentences, which create texture. 'A text has texture and this is what distinguishes it from something that is not a text. It derives this texture from the fact that it functions as a unity with respect to its environment' (Halliday and Hasan, 1976, p.2). According to them, 'The concept of cohesion is a semantic one; it refers to relations of meaning that exist within the text and that define it as a text.' They go on to say that cohesion can hold segments of a text together, making it a semantic edifice. Cohesion helps to create text and expresses the continuity that exists between one part of the discourse and another. Meanwhile, the key to the concept of coherence is not something that exists in the language, but something that exists in people. As to the definition of coherence, different linguists have different insights. Crystal defines coherence as 'the main principle of organisation (which is) assumed to account for the underlying functional connectedness' of a piece of spoken or written language (Crystal, 1985, p.53). It can be drawn that coherence involves the study of such factors as the language users' knowledge of the world, the inferences they make, and the assumptions they hold, and in particular, involves the study of the way in which communication is mediated through the use of speech acts.

Another definition of coherence held by Reinhart (1980) is that coherence is composed of the semantic and grammatical connectedness between discourse and context. According to him, coherence comprises three elements: connectedness, consistency and relevance. By connectedness, he means the sentences in a text are interconnected with each other in semantics and grammar. Consistency refers to the fact that there is no contradiction between the propositions expressed by these sentences and that they are true to an extent. However, De Beaugrande and Dressler (1981) view cohesion and coherence as two entirely separate concepts. They propose cohesion to be the structural relations on the text surface, while coherence the structural relations beneath the text surface. Ultimately, coherence is achieved not by using superficial markers, such as linguistic, grammatical devices, etc., but by psychological, cognitive, pragmatic devices, etc. Based on this sense, the addressee needs bridges (inferences, background knowledge and imagination etc.) to guide the comprehension of a discourse. Therefore, a coherent discourse should first contain a semantically united framework and must be consistent with the context of situation, which is a consequence of interactions between linguistic factors and non-linguistic factors.

**Aims and Objectives to the Study:** The aim of this research is to identify the significance of the cohesive links in Facebook discourse, i.e. how these links form or do not form a semantic structure in the text. In achieving this aim, the objectives of this research are to:

- i. show how connectivity operates in selected Facebook posts and comments;
- ii. reveal the interpretations of these texts as expressed by individuals in the comment section; and,
- iii. unearth the effects of these devices in conversations in the digital space.

**Statement of the Problem:** Several scholars have done an extensive studies on cohesion alone or the study of coherence as a distinct concept of its own on social media discourse, but none, to the best of the knowledge of this researcher, has explored both concepts as key elements in social media discourse, most especially in Facebook discourse. Therefore, this research examines the harmonious relationship between grammatical devices and the background knowledge exercised by the reader in interpreting conversations in Facebook.

**Significance of the Study:** As an area which has not been focused or explored on, the result of this research will contribute significantly to English language teachers, other researchers in discourse analysis and to students of English. Significantly, it will show the importance of coherence and cohesion in interpreting conversations, remarks or general statements from the surface level to the deep level of meaning. Also, this research will provide a landscape on which other researchers and English language teachers can build on in analyzing semantic relationships in social media threads and online learning environment.

**Scope and Methodology:** Discourse analysis is a broad field that encompasses various approaches and subfields, including critical discourse analysis, conversation analysis, pragmatics, and sociolinguistics, among others. Given the vast scope of discourse analysis, this study focuses specifically on cohesion and coherence in Facebook posts, excluding other important areas such as presupposition, conversational analysis, and turn-taking, which are beyond the purview of this research. Therefore, this research will investigate the use of cohesive devices such as reference and repetition as well as features of coherence like logical connections, inference, and cohesive links, rather than exploring the broader conceptual frameworks of cohesion and coherence. Facebook, as a social media platform, boasts of millions of users who generate an immense amount of data through their posts, comments, and interactions. It is impracticable to attempt to analyse all Facebook posts. Therefore, this study adopts a random sampling method to select a total of five posts collected over a period of one month. The selected posts will include two from a Facebook group, "Tales of the Nigerian" and three individual posts with comments. This sampling strategy will enable an in-depth analysis of cohesion and coherence in a manageable and representative dataset. By focusing on this specific subset of Facebook posts, this study aims to gain insights into the linguistic features that contribute to cohesion and coherence in online discourse.

#### **Theoretical Framework: Cooperative Principle**

In his paper, 'Logic and Conversation', Grice (1975) argues that in order for a person to interpret what someone else says, some kind of cooperative principle must be assumed to be in operation. The cooperative principle says we should aim to make our conversational contribution 'such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or


direction' (Grice, 1975, p.45) of the exchange in which we are engaged. Grice based his cooperative principle on four sub-principles, or maxims. There are maxims of quality, quantity, relation and manner. The maxim of quality says people should only say what they believe to be true and what they have evidence for. Grice's maxim of quantity says we should make our contribution as informative as is required for the particular purpose and not make it more informative than is required. The maxim of relation says we should make our contribution relevant to the interaction. In maxim of manner, Grice posits that we should be clear in what we say, we should avoid ambiguity or obscurity and we should be brief and orderly in our contribution to the interaction. If someone is unsure of what he or she wants to say, or wants to prevent someone else from inferring that he or she has evidence for what he or she says, people often use meta-discourse (Hyland 2005b) to comment on what they are about to say or have just said. This use of meta-discourse is central to the interpretation of texts as it shows both their attitude to what they are saying as well as their attitude to the audience of the text. A speaker may, for example say 'I may be mistaken, but ...' or end a sentence with 'maybe ...' to show that he or she is aware of and is following the maxim of quality. Equally, a speaker may say 'I won't bore you with all the details' to show that he or she is aware of the maxim of quantity.

Also, a speaker may indicate a change of topic using a device such as 'by the way' or use a marker such as 'anyway' to show that he or she is aware of the maxim of relation. He or she may say something such as 'this may be a bit confused, but...' to show that he or she is aware of the maxim of manner. Grice argues that we assume a speaker is following these maxims and combine this with our knowledge of the world to work out what they mean by what they say. In the same vein, Thomas (1995) and Cutting (2002) discuss differences between flouting and violating maxims. A speaker is flouting a maxim if he or she does not observe a maxim but has no intention of deceiving or misleading the listener. A person is violating a maxim if he or she is likely to mislead the listener.

## **An Overview of Discourse Analysis in Social Media Discourse: Facebook**

### **Textual Features / Data Presentation**

#### **Text 1**



**Tanko Lami**  
47 m · 🌐

...

✕

If you are a believer and follower of Jesus Christ.  
This is the time to prioritize your faith more than ever.

It's hard. I know it is, even Jesus didn't promise it will be easy.

In hard times, you will cry, you will doubt him, you will challenge him, you will challenge his existence...

You will call, he will not answer.  
You will cry, you won't see him.  
You will run to him, he will be absent...

But that is the time for you to trust and hold him firmer, believe me.

The devil is out to attack your mind, don't give him the victory, child of God. Don't!

When God is not talking, he is working...  
When he seems to not be there, he is shaping you for greater things, remember, a surgeon doesn't perform surgeries in noisy places, he isolates himself to repair what has been spoilt...

Trust him!!



Chisom John

Again, lord I will wait...thank U ma'am,U don't know how much I wanted this reminder

7 m Like Reply

## Text 2



Chioma Chinaka Chigozie-Okwum

I would have been flying all expense paid to Denmark 🇩🇰 in July if only my paper was not rejected 🙄🙄. My village people at work 🙄.

2 d Like Reply

4 🙄🙄🙄🙄



Glorpraise Chika

Chioma Chinaka Chigozie-Okwum  
Soon you will have access to all of them and even go there.

2 d Like Reply



Chioma Chinaka Chigozie-Okwum

Glorpraise Chika Yeahh I just need to write my paper well ❤️

1 d Like Reply

1 🙄

## Text 3



Martin Beck Nworah ✓

18 Jun · 🌐

When I miss shouting "Up Nepa aaa," I turn off my light and stay in darkness for some minutes and turn the light back on.

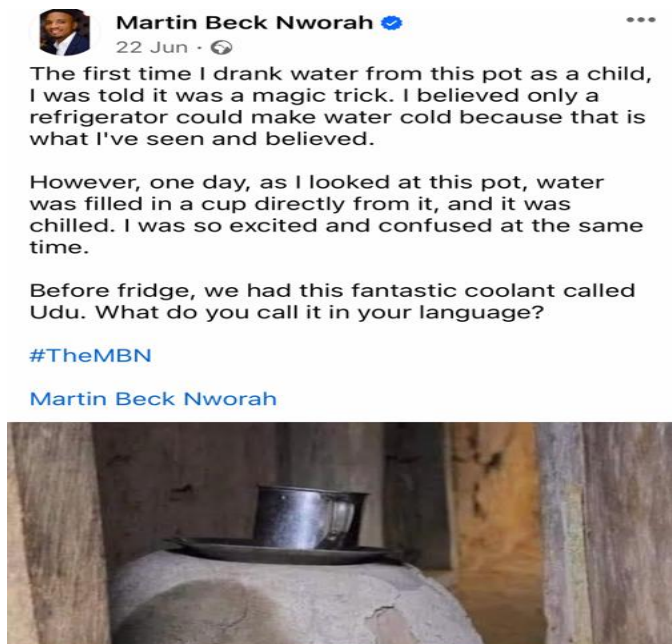
One time, they took the light to work on the line for one hour, and I was excited. There is steady light here so your mood is not controlled by that.

#TheMBN





#### Text 4







## Text 5





### **Elements of Cohesion in Facebook Posts**

The term cohesion refers to the grammatical and lexical elements on the surface of a text which can form connections (relations) between parts of the text. The common elements of cohesion in the illustrated Facebook posts above include:

**Reference:** Cohesion lies in the continuity of reference, whereby the same thing enters into a discourse the second time. Types of references expressed in the above Facebook discourse are:

- i. **Personal Reference:** The items we use for personal reference are personal and possessive pronouns which include *'I, you, he, she, it, they, me, you, her, him, it, us, them, mine, yours, my,* etc. In text 1, pronouns such as *'he and him'* are used to indicate what has already been said, referring back to *'Jesus Christ, Devil, God and surgeon'*. Through the use of these cohesive links in text 1, the writer intends to give *'Jesus Christ, Devil and God'* human-like qualities and create a religious subject matter. Also, the writer uses *'he and him'* to refer to *'Jesus Christ, Devil, God'* and *'surgeon'* in order to create a comparison between supernatural and human realms. Also in the sentence *'it's hard, I know it is'*, the pronoun *'it'* connects with what has already been said in the first sentence which is *"this is the time to prioritise your faith in God"*. This indicates that the writer acknowledges the reader's struggle in prioritising his or her faith in God, creating a sense of shared knowledge. In text 4, the writer uses *'it'* in the sentence *'it was a magic trick'* to connect to what has already been said in the first sentence, *'the first time I drank water from this pot as a child'*. This creates a sense of connection between the past and the present. Secondly, *'it'*, is used as reference to a childhood experience which evokes a feeling of nostalgia in the writer's mind. In text 5, *'it'*, is used to refer the reader back to what has already been said in the previous sentence which is *'apple'*. This enables the reader to focus on the most important part of the text known as the apple. The possessive pronoun *'their'* is also used as a personal referent to connect *'their'* to *'my 2 kids'*. This highlights the special relationship between the writer and her kids.
- ii. **Deitic Reference:** Deitic reference or deixis is exophoric (outside or external to the discourse) and it refers to entities in the physical context, requiring physical identification for the discourse to be meaningful. The items we use for deictic reference are determiners and adverbs which include *the, this, that, these, those, here, there, then, now,* etc. In the comment section of text 1, the commentator uses the deictic *'this'* to refer back to the entire post by saying *'you don't know how much I wanted this reminder'*. The deictic *'this'* in the comment section of text 1, indicates that the entire post is of great significance to the reader. It shows that the entire text has impacted the life of the reader. Secondly, in text 3, *'there and here'* points to the writer's location which is the United Kingdom. In text 4, the deixis *'this'*, is used to capture the reader's attention towards the location of the object known as the *'clay pot'* portrayed in the picture. It is used to create a connection between the text and the visual element in the picture. In text 5 the writer uses the deixis *'this'* in the sentence, *'this red apple'* and *'the apple to disappoint us like this'*, to serve as a pointer to the picture of the apple, showing how rotten the fruit is. Finally in the comment section of text 2, the commentator says *'soon you will have access to all of them and even go there. Them and there'* are deictics used as referent to the entire post. The deictic elements *'them and there'*, enables the commentator to show his or her support in a concise manner,

such that '*them*' refers to 'Europe and Switzerland' while '*there*' points to the physical environment of the place.

- iii. **Repetition:** The repetition of key words and phrases is an important part of cohesion. Repetition ties the sections of a text together. In text 1, the repetition of 'you will' connects the sentences together and unifies the entire text. This highlights the emotional state of the reader, showing the futility of his or her actions. Also in text 5, the repetition of 'aboki' is used to foreground the most important word in the entire text. This enables the reader to see that the 'aboki' is responsible for the rotten fruit.

### **Features of Coherence in Facebook Posts**

Whereas cohesion is a property of individual words and phrases and their syntactic connectedness, expressed in words, phrases and sentences, coherence is a property of the entire text, and its connections do not exist in words and structures, but in people. Features of coherence in the Facebook posts are as follows:

- i. **Logical Ordering:** If a text is structured in an order that makes sense and flows well, it is easier to read and more coherent. This is a description of a text that allows ideas to develop in a way that is understood and easy to follow. For example in text 2, the text is structured in a descending order, such that the writer begins by stating her desires/reasons to visit Europe, commenting on the beauty of Switzerland in Europe, before finalizing her discourse by requesting for travel tips. Every sentence in the entire text is written in a logical form such that each sentence reflects the same subject matter, Europe. Again, the writer in the comment section says 'I would have been flying an all expense paid (SIC) to Denmark in July if only my paper was not rejected', and the reply to this comment follows a logical order. The reply is done within the subject matter discussed and not outside the topic, as someone replies by saying 'yeah I need to write my paper well'.
- ii. **Inferences:** An inference is defined as the information that is not expressed explicitly by the text but is derived on the basis of the background knowledge of the reader and is encoded in the mental representation of the text. In text 3, the comment to the post is made based on the background knowledge of the reader which is not provided in the text. The expression 'up Nepa aaa' is understood by the reader based on the Nigerian situation of inadequate power supply. Apparently, text 3 Facebook posts will not be coherent to a person who is not of a Nigerian descent. This is because the experience tied to the expression of joy each time power supply is restored, cannot be understood by anyone that is not living in Nigeria. Secondly, in text 4, people in the comment section can relate to the sight of the 'pot' as someone calls it 'native fridge' while another person refers to it as 'udu' clay pot, making the entire post coherent to the Nigerian audience. Apart from the Nigerian situation, inferences are made on a particular text based on shared experiences. In text 5, individuals in the comment section are able to make meaning out of the post through their own experience of the same issue. This is clearly seen in Ochoche David Ngbede's comment where he says he had a similar experience in modern market and another person attests to the meaning of the Facebook post through her experience of buying the same thing, 'same shape of apple, same spot of spoilage'.
- iii. **Cohesive Links:** Cohesive links result in purely grammatically connected sentences but for there to be a meaningful discourse, cohesion must always be accompanied by

coherence. In text 1, the cohesive links such as personal references like 'he and him' to refer back to what has already been said of 'God, Jesus Christ, devil and surgeon', and the repetition of 'you will', makes the entire text meaningful and easier to interpret as an embodiment of a specific subject matter running through the entire discourse. Similarly, in text 2, 'I have never been to Europe' is replaced with 'I want to break that personal record' to show the continuity of an idea, which is the desire to travel, throughout the text, making it easier for its audience to understand.

## **Conclusion**

Prior to the advancement of technology, the study of cohesion and coherence was conducted on articles, inaugural lectures, news, journals, novels, etc. However, social media has taken its pride of place in discourse and as such, the 21st century discourse is mostly done on online platforms, because of the renewed interest of individuals in Internet stories, articles, and day-to-day journaling of activities. This research has explored features of cohesion and coherence in Facebook posts, focusing on reference, repetition, logical ordering, inferences, and cohesive links. For instance, 'he and him' are used as personal pronouns to personify 'Jesus Christ, God and Devil' in order to rope the entire sentences together in a religious subject matter. Also each comment is a bearer of cohesive links and shared background knowledge. This can be seen in text 4 where there are comments like 'I first drank from this native fridge during my youth service in the north', to show that the comment is a continuation of the post's subject matter. In the same vein, for any discourse to be coherent or meaningful, shared knowledge is required through the Nigerian situation and personal experiences. For example, the expression 'up Nepa aaa' is easily understood by fellow Nigerians on account of the experience of unstable power supply. Additionally, pictures are used with deictic references in Facebook posts which indicate that sometimes, a discourse can only be meaningful through physical identification. In text 5, the picture of the rotten apple makes the entire discourse meaningful through the deictic 'this' which serves as a pointer. All these devices employed by writers in the five selected Facebook posts, help to provide a meaningful, engaging and informative online discourse.

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