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TECHNOLOGY

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Opponent's Review for the habilitation thesis

“Coherence in political speeches.  
Interpreting ideational, interpersonal and textual meanings  
in opening addresses”

by

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*1. Topic*

This thesis makes a valuable contribution to the field of discourse coherence. This is a relatively new and interesting field of study with considerable differences between major contributors to the scholarly debate, as the author points out. The theoretical concepts developed in this thesis are applied to a small but suitable corpus, opening addresses delivered by the three UNESCO Directors-General between 1974 and 2009 in English, which is not their mother-tongue. Since they come from Senegal, Spain and Japan, their very different backgrounds can be assumed to leave cultural and personal traces in their speeches, depending on the context and the political climate of their time. This allows the author to combine a strong theoretical argumentation with several small corpus-linguistic case studies that show the usefulness of the approach for practical issues.

*2. Theoretical Background*

In chapter 2 (“Theoretical preliminaries and research methodology”, pp. 10-70), the author gives a clear survey of the “state of the art” of discourse coherence and defines coherence on the ideational, interpersonal and textual plane, emphasising their complementarity, without disregarding the possibilities of disturbed coherence in reality. The analytical framework follows a genre approach, which is very common in current linguistic research. A major fraction of the thesis is dedicated to defining the more specific genre opening addresses, which are an interesting and neglected area in linguistic research. Despite this practical importance, this genre may have major repercussions in political discourse, culture and atmosphere, since opening addresses are almost a kind of “identity card” for the respective Director-General in the UNESCO context. The author's definition of the thesis' research area is as follows (p. 21):

Discourse coherence, therefore, can be regarded as an instantiation of the interpretation potential of a text, which is activated in the process of a particular interpretative decoding in which the hearer/reader creates his/her own discourse from the text by assigning it intentionality (not necessarily the one intended by the speaker/writer) and recreating its meaning, while projecting his/her personal opinions, attitudes, feelings and emotions onto the interaction.

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investigating real language  
promoting intercultural  
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This definition is compatible with the current understanding outlined in detail in section 2.1, since it sees as crucial factors the scalar nature of coherence and the resultant degree of understanding. The main theoretical stance of this thesis is well presented in section 2.2. (pp. 22-51).

The empirical basis of this work can best be seen in Table 3 (pronominal reference, p. 121) and Table 4 (possessive reference, p. 123). A major subsection of the quantitative analysis is the use of inclusive *we*, as presented in Table 5 (p. 132) and Table 6 (p. 133). The analysis of the models *must*, *should*, *have to* in Table 7 (p. 147), Table 8 (p. 148), Table 9 (p. 149) emphasises the deontic side, imposing a course of action, whereas the discussion of modal markers (Table 10, p. 154, Table 11, p. 155) distinguishes not only the formal side (from modal verbs to modal auxiliaries to lexical modal verbs), but also the degree of modality from high to low or from truth commitment to uncertainty. In all these cases, the author provides interesting glimpses into the stance of the respective Director-General. The modal markers are well chosen: the auxiliaries (*will*, *can*, *could*, *may*, *might*, *cannot*), modal adjectives and adverbs (e.g. *sure*, *certain*, *clear*, *certainly*, *undoubtedly*, *surely*, *truly*, *probably*, *perhaps*) and lexical verbs (*know*, *think*, *believe*, *take it*, *hope*). A more detailed analysis would have been possible, if Matsuura had not used surprisingly few of these markers (38 in Table 10 and 42 in Table 11).

This brief summary shows that the author has established a sound theoretical basis that can be applied convincingly to practical analyses.

### 3. Methodology

This thesis follows a clear methodological structure on a corpus-linguistic basis with a qualitative and a quantitative perspective: the first half of chapter 4 is more qualitative, the second more quantitative.

The methodology of the thesis is explained in detail in section 2.3. ("Analytical framework", pp. 51-70): the discussion of coherence aspects culminates in Fig. 3 which illustrates graphically how the different planes have intersections of the well-known concepts of rhetorical move and logical relations (fig. 3, p. 63). In the discussion of genre analysis (pp. 71-88), the author refers mainly to her own book (Dontcheva-Navratilova 2009) without neglecting to place her concept within the wider field, which has been shaped by Swales, Wodak, and others. The model followed (in Fig. 4 on p. 65) comprises of three to four variables under each of the factor groups: situational parameters, discourse participants, communicative purposes, and communicative conventions. The summary shows that the explicit methodological aspects are discussed relatively briefly in this work.

However, the author does not disregard a potential problem for the study comparing the speeches of three Directors-General, i.e. that the cultural and personal differences may also be affected by the time span of thirty-five years from 1974 to 2009 (e.g. p. 9 and p. 161).

To sum up, the author demonstrates the necessary methodological skills for qualitative and quantitative analyses of the sub-genre opening addresses.

### 4. Results

In her conclusions (pp. 159-165), the author summarises her work, emphasising concrete results as follows (p. 162):

The results of the analysis of the management of discourse topic highlight the correlation existing between linguistic features, rhetorical moves and persuasive strategies used by the orators. My findings have evidenced that the hierarchy of discourse topics, based on the relation of generalization holding between all

discourse-segment topics and the Global theme which coincides with the topic of the conference or meeting at which the speech is delivered, is one of the main factors contributing to the perception of global coherence on the ideational plane of discourse. Topic continuity based on a selected pattern of thematic progression, temporal and referential coherence, and coherent topic shifts at discourse-segment and rhetorical-move boundaries are instrumental in enhancing local coherence on the ideational and textual planes of discourse. In addition, this research has proved that the essentially interpersonal vocative address forms have gradually developed a discourse structuring function related to the marking of topic shift and rhetorical-move boundary, which can now be considered as a distinctive feature of the genre.

This quotation shows that the author sees her work more in a theoretical context than in the concrete differentiation of opening speeches by the three Directors-General, where further studies are of course possible. From a communicative point of view, “when delivering their speeches the Directors-General try to achieve their communicative goals, and if necessary get past the epistemic vigilance of the addressees and the audience, by enhancing speaker credibility through the establishment of a dialogic framework for the negotiation of a coherent representation of identities, social roles, shared value systems and relationships with the audience, and by constructing a coherent logical argumentation to support their claims and actions” (p. 161f).

On the interpersonal plane, pronominal reference is shown to be used differently by the three Directors-General, especially in the treatment of the *us* vs. *them* opposition, which is interpreted as related to ideological background and the respective political situation during their time of office.

On the interpersonal plane, the two types of modality are shown to play different roles: deontic modality can be seen as “an ideologically-based representation of the discourse world of the speaker in terms of ‘right’ or ‘wrong’” (p. 164); epistemic modality can be seen as “expressing strong commitment to the truth of the proposition and to the (un)desirability of events and actions from the point of view of the institutional ideology” (ibid.). This distinction in analysis and interpretation illustrates nicely how careful scholarly work in this field has to proceed in detail.

On the whole, the author demonstrates that all planes of discourse (conceptual connectedness, evaluative and dialogical consistency, and textual relatedness) affect the interpretative perception. The interplay of the three planes of discourse is visualised in the diagram with the overlapping circles in Fig. 3 (on p. 63 already), where logical relations and rhetorical moves can be seen as the intersections of Discourse topic, Evaluation and Cohesion.

Finally, the author emphasises herself that her work can be expanded in several directions, although she has made her contribution to the analysis of this under-explored genre (opening addresses); more applications to other genres in political discourse are possible, and the framework offered in this thesis can serve as a model.

To sum up again, the author succeeds in establishing opening addresses as an interesting subgenre of political texts, in analysing specific texts as a corpus in terms of key features of coherence, especially rhetorical structure, reference and modality and thus contribute to the genre-linguistic as well as descriptive linguistic scholarship.

## 5. Formalities

The work is presented in a reader-friendly style with examples and good tables. The language is clearly academic (cf. the quotations above), but major concepts and key terms are well explained for the non-specialist reader. The tables allow readers to draw their own conclusions about the

differences between the three major generals' open addresses; these tables and figures are well presented using subtle background colours making it easier for readers to follow the quantitative discussion clearly.

There are only a few minor points that I would like to recommend to reconsider before publication:

1. It may be helpful for readers to find a list of tables and figures at the beginning of the work, since they are important evidence particularly for the differences between the three Directors-General, and to make sure that the table of contents' page numbers are clearly right aligned, which they are not in my official copy.
2. Table 2 on page 120 does not have the usual format (with shades), and the numbering of tables in this part seems to be incorrect there are two types of Table 2 and 3 on p. 117 and 119 and 120 and 121).
3. All tables should have the same (historical) sequence M'Bow – Mayor – Matsuura, and the total columns at the right-hand side should be included wherever they can help in making comparisons easy for the reader (at least Tables 4, 5, 8, 9).

Of course, these formalities do not reduce the overall academic value from the work presented (together with about 10 missing article page numbers in the References), when this scholarly work is presented to a wide readership.

Many more statistical analyses would be possible, but the difference between the three subcorpora (M'Bow approx. 16,800 words, Mayor approx. 19,000 words and Matsuura approx. 14,500 words) is not so big to force the author to normalise, and she does not "overinterpret" some of the small figures: M'Bow has only 23 cases of *we*, 21 inclusive (Table 5, p. 132), Matsuura has only 33 of the modals analysed, mostly *must* (Table 7, p. 147) and only 38 modal markers altogether (Table 10, p. 154), so major significance tests may be irrelevant.

The work is rounded off by a good bibliography with over 10 pages and an appendix, a list of the opening addresses of the three UNESCO Directors-General. One example for each Director-General is quoted in the appendix in full. So readers can get a feel for themselves of the genre and of the differences between the three politicians from very different cultural backgrounds, which of course leave their mark on their language.

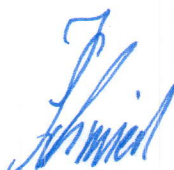
All in all, the work is written in a very concise form, but I do not think that any major part of this interesting genre analysis is missing.

## 6. Conclusion

I therefore conclude that the work submitted meets the standard requirements placed on habilitation theses in the field.

The candidate has demonstrated clearly that she can carry out a major piece of research on a sound theoretical basis with convincing methodologies that lead to new insights into the specific topic, the major opening addresses, but also the larger field of discourse coherence.

I have no reservations to recommend accepting this thesis, since the candidate has clearly proven that she is an expert in the field.



(Prof. Dr. Josef Schmied)