Polyphonic analysis is a specific linguistic approach to text analyses, which takes its starting point in a recent semantic-pragmatic theory developed in France by Oswald Ducrot and his disciples. Whereas these authors are working on the description of particular linguistic items (for instance connectors), I have found, during my teaching of text linguistics, that their apparatus seems to be very suitable for text analysis purposes as such.

It is a well established tradition to operate with several levels in text analyses, and the recent more linguistic approaches do not seem to alter anything at this point. This means that text analyses easily become a heterogeneous or even an a-theoretical matter. Often the analyst will adopt an eclectic approach using at each level theoretical pieces that seem to fit. May be it has to be so, but from a theoretical point of view it must be desirable to try to find a more unified approach; not so much because it is more satisfactory to the spirit, but simply because such an approach allows us to reveal systematic relations between the different "levels" of the text, and thereby opening up more explicatory analyses.

This is why I have found the polyphonic apparatus so attractive. It permits us in fact to reveal and describe in a very precise manner the relations that tie "pragmatic levels" such as the speaker/listener relation, presupposition development or even speech acts with "linguistic" or "grammatical levels" such as syntax, vocabulary and morphology. And it has a further - certainly not negligible virtue : it has been elaborated for purposes quite other than those which are ours.

I shall first give a rough out-line of the polyphonic theory as it stands today, and then I shall provide some additional remarks and hints as to its application to text analyses. I will not be able to go into any of its many subtle details, but I think that even an out-line will suffice to show its suitability. Unfortunately there is no place in this paper for a proper illustration of the procedure.

1. Polyphony

The utterances may be said to be the molecules of the text. The structure the text and they are themselves structured. In a text analysis,
their inner structure should thus be subject to analysis in so far as it is contributing to their outer structure which is (part of) the text structure. The theory of polyphony deals with such "inner structure" elements.

In a certain sense, the meaning of the utterance (l’"énonce") may be said to be a description of the locutionary act (l’"énonciation"). The utterance shows the locutionary act as accomplishing diverse acts; among which are the illocutionary acts. One locutionary act may promote several such acts, and it is not necessarily the case that the same person is responsible for all of these acts. Let's take an example (in order to give a better illustration of the mechanisms I give the utterances without context. Indeed, this is a pure figment of the linguist's mind. In real life most parameters will always be instantiated, which obscures illustration):

(1) Have you heard that Peter has stopped beating his wife?

In a possible interpretation of (1), we may distinguish at least three different acts: a question, a statement (of 'Peter does not beat his wife at present') and a presupposition (of 'Peter has formerly beaten his wife'). Whereas the speaker makes the question act on his own account, it is not so with respect to the other acts. He does not guarantee the truth of the statement, and the proposition of the presupposition is rather presented as known in advance to be true by the communicators or by Vox Publica (Ducrot 1980:40). We may say that many voices are speaking at the same time in an utterance like (1), and it is this characteristic of Ducrot's theory that has given inspiration to the name polyphony.

Let's now introduce the essential terms of polyphony. The producer of the locutionary act is called the speaker le "locuteur"). He is normally identified by the traces he leaves in the sentence, e.g. by the pronoun I, but this is not necessarily so. The persons that are held responsible for the illocutionary acts by the speaker (and the other acts shown) are called the enunciators (les "énonciateurs"). We have seen that several enunciators may be introduced in one single utterance, and the relationship between them and the speaker is an important aspect of the meaning. The person for whom the utterance is produced is called the recipient (l’"Ilallocutaire"). It is the person for whom the pronoun you is used. The target of the illocutionary act is called its adresse (le "destinataire"). On the recipient side the same possibilities of combinations exist, contributing likewise to the interpretation of the utterance.

The example of polyphony given in (1) was rather simple. In fact a deeper analysis would have revealed more polyphonic layers which I disregarded for the sake of clearness. As we shall see, a whole series of morphemes, syntactic structures, etc. introduce polyphony with them. The standard example is that of the so-called descriptive negation (ne...
pas). Take the utterance in (2):

(2) Pierre n'est pas petit.

The speaker of (2) presents two acts with different enunciators ($e_1$ and $e_2$) as illustrated in (2'):

(2') $e_1$: Pierre est petit  
$e_2$: $e_1$'s statement is false

The speaker is dissociated from $e_1$ and associated with $e_2$. You might wonder whether this is not a clumsy way to describe the negation. On the contrary! Quite a number of linguistic facts may be neatly explained in this way. For instance, if the speaker continues with on the contrary, what he wants to say then is not that reality is contrary to what is said in (2), for that would mean that Pierre was in fact little. No, what he wants to express is (once more) that reality is contrary to $e_1$'s statement. Many connectors display this special property of making a connection to some kind of underlying act. Furthermore, well-known pragmatic consequences of the use of negation are even predictable in this theory. We all know the reaction: But I never said that!

Let's take another example (from Anscombe 1985:345):

(3) Pierre a ne viendra pas parce ça m'embête.
    a. ... qu'il vienne.
    b. ... qu'il ne vienne pas.

(3) is ambiguous in so far as two contradictory continuations (a. and b.) are equally possible. This shows that the indefinite pronoun ça can refer to either of the two acts in a negated utterance.

I could continue for hours the list of examples of morphemes provoking polyphony in a similar way (take only all the different concessive constructions!). Even though the polyphonic theory is very young, there are already many research results as to the polyphonic nature of different connectors and operators. And other recent analyses seem to be easily "translated" into a polyphonic frame-work. Even the mood system exhibits polyphonic properties. "Le conditionnel" and "le subjonctif" have already been studied from this point of view. This means that we have at our disposal a lot of detail studies all ready for our purposes. And it is important to notice that these results have been achieved by means of independent hypotheses. Their eventual usefulness for text analysis constitutes
thus an extra argument for their validity.

2. Polyphony in texts

To sum up: In each utterance, the speaker presents one or more enunciators, which are defined simultaneously by their relation to the speaker and by their being responsible for the different acts performed during the production of the utterance. The speaker lets several voices speak with their different tongues, he produces polyphony. These enunciators are in fact mere abstract text elements. To describe their textual function, the theatre metaphor seems appropriate. If we simplify, and are content with speaking about "simple" text presenting only one speaker - and lots of texts are "simple" in this way - we may compare the speaker with the author of a play who lets different actors (the enunciators) appear on the stage. The relations between what a given actor is giving expression to and what the author means may be of all kinds. One actor may be the author's mouthpiece, another may be his contrast, and another may merely express some kind of public opinion, and so on. But any actor must be consistent with himself. The same actor cannot first say one thing, and then - without any qualification - assert the opposite unless of course doing so is part of his character!

The same is true of the enunciators produced in text. In order for a text to be a text, it must be coherent, and one of important constraints this property imposes on the text shape is exactly that the development of the enunciators must be consistent and coherent. The polyphonic text analysis now consists in spotting the different enunciators put on the stage by the speaker, in defining their relations with the speaker and in following and describing their expansion throughout the text. And let me stress once more - it cannot be said often enough - that this task is highly operative because we are able to appeal to precise rules governing the polyphonic function of the different words and phrases we find in the text.

Some references


Outlines a polyphonic analysis of the concessive relation.
A series of articles about different connectors. Most of them are not in a polyphonic frame-work but may easily reinterpreted in this way.

The last chapter of this book ("Esquisse d'une polyphonique de l'enonciation") provides the best (and only?) introduction to polyphonic theory.

The book in which you find the first (sketches of) polyphonic analysis of some morphemes (especially of the word *d'ailleurs*).

Suggests a polyphonic analysis of *le subjonctif*.

An introduction to Geneva school discourse analysis, which takes into account some polyphonic aspects.