9506-DIS

UNDERSTANDING DISCOURSE*

activity, analysis & practical application

a discursive exercise
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*according to the tenets of cohesion and coherence.

UNDERSTANDING DISCOURSE*

1. <u>Making a text cohesive and coherent</u>

(b)   Edward Bear lives above a delicatessen on Beaufort Street in Perth - which sometimes presents real problems.

(d)   It is not that the young artists objects to the noise associated with the shop, it is the smell.

(a)   Often the wonderful aroma of smoked sausage, continental cheeses and pies lingers in his room.

(g)   And for a young and hungry artist this can be trying

—paragraph—

(f)   Bear is the epitome of the talented and struggling painter who spends what money he has on canvas and paint.

(h)   His bedroom is also his studio.

(e)   It is poorly furnished but neat.

(c)   Windows overlook a park, but the view is obscured by paintings resting against the wall.

In rearranging a piece of text or discourse at this level, one can be assisted in various ways both by cohesive markers and pragmatic elements that help the form of the text to take shape. This case was no exception, and can be safely examined from both perspectives.

(b) The opening sentence was not difficult to choose because the conventions of the text form indicated by the propositions provided give us a few signs that make any other choice impossible. Firstly, the name of the subject of the text is introduced. The illocutionary function is therefore to introduce this character. It is, in fact, the only sentence in the whole dialogue in which the entire name of the artist is used. This is the first definite clue to signify that this sentence would begin the dialogue. In addition to that, however, this sentence has a number of other illocutionary functions that will help us further on to make the text 'cohere'; pointers which are all 'subjects' of some significance to the discourse and that are being in this sentence introduced. The proposition states where Mr. Bear actually lives, and suggests that this living space provides certain 'problems.'[1]   The nature of these problems are at this stage left open, but provide the space for the reader to become curious about what they could be.

(d) The choice of the second sentence was based on a combination of influences from both the context and the use of cohesive markers. The placing of this sentence in the propositional development is important: firstly, the name of the artist relates the

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[1] The use of the deictical substitution word 'which' lets us know that it is the living space that is causing the problems.

sentence anaphorically to the first, as does the word *delicatessen* , which belongs of course to the generic category of 'shops', so we are aware of another level of reference to the first sentence. In terms of illocutionary development, the reader hears that Mr. Bear is in actual fact an 'artist', a fact that, although not at this stage assisting in providing a great deal of coherence to the discourse, will become rapidly important in later development.

(a) It would actually have been possible, in a cohesive sense, to have placed sentence (a) directly after sentence (b), which would have resulted in the following combination:

> (b) Edward Bear lives above a delicatessen on Beaufort Street in Perth - which
>   sometimes presents real problems.
> (a) Often the wonderful aroma of smoked sausage, continental cheeses and pies
>   lingers in his room.

This possibility is 'cohesively' valid, however, in terms of illocutionary force, the insertion (d) between (b) and (a) makes much more illocutionary sense because the problem of the origin of the 'problem' is resolved. The illocutionary development would appear, then, as printed below:

> (b) A character is introduced as living above a shop, and it is stated that he has
>   problems with his apartment.
> (d) The character, who is revealed to be an 'artist', is stated to be having problems
>   with the smell emerging from beneath.
> (a) These problems are stated to come from the fact that the smell of the food is
>   pleasant.

Cohesively then, the insertion of (d) makes little difference to the propositional development. However, through the propositional content of the statement itself, the reader can infer that the 'smells' of the food come from the delicatessen, especially since the problem presented in (b) have now been clarified in (d) as not being related to noise but to smells.

(g) The last sentence of the first paragraph is the logical choice because of the illocutionary development of the discourse. Cohesively, the sentence certainly fits because the 'problem' is anaphorically referred to as 'it' and Mr Bear as 'young artist.' More interesting however is how this sentence helps to make the text cohere. Let's examine the illocutionary development as it resolves itself with the addition of (g):

> (b) A character is introduced as living above a shop, and it is stated that he has
>   problems with his apartment.
> (d) The character, who is revealed to be an 'artist', is stated to be having
>   problems with the smell emerging from beneath.
> (a) These problems are stated to come from the fact the smell of the food is in
>   fact pleasant.
> (g) The 'artist' is stated to be having difficulty with this smell because he is poor
>   and hungry.

The illocutionary force of the last sentence fits perfectly into the structure of the paragraph. Many of the openings presented by the earlier sentences have been resolved, making it clear that our assumptions about artists, financial/social distinctions and hunger presented by the first sentences were, in fact, correct. This last sentence acts to *confirm* things we already suspect and rounds off a division of the text, therefore we can safely say that a paragraph division begins after sentence (g).

We could also say that this sentence fits into this developmental structure because it conforms to written (English) language conventions. In the first sentence, the name of the person is used, in the second sentence he is referred to as 'the artist', in the third he is not referred to at all, and in the fourth he is referred to in a general sentence which refers generally to 'a young artist'. This use of the noun acts to 'inform' us about the character (provide us with his name, profession and approximate age) and at the same time conforms to conventions of economy and avoidance of unnecessary repetition.

(f) The choice of the following sentence is again based on written conventions. Because the first paragraph in the text uses the complete name, the second paragraph would not look or sound good if the same name was repeated. Therefore the logical choice for the next sentence is (f) in which only the character's second name is used. In this sentence, the subject of the 'artist' returns, and his difficult financial situation is also mentioned. This makes it a good beginning to a second paragraph because the most important propositional elements from the first paragraph have returned.

(h) Use of 'his' is a deictical cohesive marker that refers anaphorically to 'Bear' in the last sentence, making this sentence cohesive. The propositional content of the sentence refers to the apartment discussed in the first paragraph, allowing the main subject to return, providing us also with more information about his financial misfortune: again the illocutionary content of the proposition implies that he is poor because he sleeps in his 'studio', which at the same time acts to confirm that he is an artist.

(e) The 'it' acts again as an anaphoric cohesive marker which the reader can assume from the structure of the sentence is referring to *his bedroom* in (h). The illocutionary content has a further development that fits into the context of this paragraph, helping to make it coherent: although the artist does not have enough money to buy nice furniture, he keeps it clean which means that he is after all not a social degenerate. If, of course, we placed sentence (g) in place of (e), the illocutionary development of the sentence would change considerably, as demonstrated below:

> (h) His bedroom is also his studio
> (g) And for a young and hungry artist this can be trying

This would imply that being so poor is difficult for an artist, and that this particular artist might be unhappy in these circumstances. This changes considerably the

illocutionary development for these sentences, and in fact the entire article, although remaining essentially as cohesive as any other sentence combination.

(c) The placing of this last sentence is related largely to the illocutionary development of the paragraph which have developed to this stage. None of the subjects have at this stage been presented (the window or the park, or the wall, or even the paintings standing against it), so if we place it directly next to sentence (e) an 'incohesive' pair is formed:

> (e) It is poorly furnished but neat.
> (c) Windows overlook a park, but the view is obscured by paintings resting against the wall.

Although lacking cohesion, we can demonstrate that the discourse is coherent by relating it to the complete context of the second part, in particular the illocutionary development:

> (f) The 'artist' is struggling to be able to stay alive and at the same time produce his work. . .
> (h) And therefore he must live in less than perfect standards. . .
> (e) Although his dedication to his art means he cannot afford to buy nice furniture, his apartment is 'clean' which corresponds to a protestant 'good' ethic. . .
> (f) The artist is so involved with his work as a painter, that he doesn't lose time looking out his window at the park.

This sentence manages again to round off the discussion of artists, their economic situation and the devotion they have to their work, even though in this case three totally new subjects are introduced.

We can see through this short analysis that propositional and illocutionary development both play very important roles in the understanding of a given text/discourse. We can also see that the propositional structure of a text has a great affect on the illocutionary development.

2. Comparison between text A and text B

Text A and B have a few similarities: they are both in English, they are both written texts and they are both involved with the description of a vacation. In this way, they are connected with a set of conventions ascribed to written (English) language and also to conventions of describing vacations. How similar, then, are these texts? As will be demonstrated in this brief survey, the contrasts far outweigh the similarities by exploring how the register of the two texts differ.

FIELD

'Field' refers to the fact that the kind of language that we use varies according to the activity we are involved in or the function of the communicative act. In the cases of these two texts, the field involves the type of language that is directly connected with the particular types of writing in each text. Although the subject is essentially 'vacation', it will be revealed that the two fields can be classified differently and are in fact highly contrasting.

Text A. The language used in this dialogue is intricately connected with the conventions associated with the writing of 'postcards'. We can describe a number of factors that belong to this field:
(i) The text is usually written in the past tense because it is involved in describing events that have occurred.
e.g. *we made it to Dubrovnik without incident*
(ii) The text is structured informally because of the speed with which it is usually written. Postcards are usually handwritten, although this example has been typed up.
(iii) The language used is economical because the space on the postcard is limited and the writer would prefer to be getting back to holiday-making than to be writing postcards. e.g. *only missed late snow . . . by a couple of weeks* - elimination of unnecessary first person plural.
(iv) The structure of the text is free, allowing the writer to change subjects quickly and without worrying about the consequences.
e.g. *We were lucky enough to find a nice flat. . . There were quite a few Germans in town.*

Text B. The language used in this dialogue is connected with the conventions associated with written 'advertisements'. Below are a number of factors of this field that can be compared to those of text A.
(i) The text is usually written in the present or conditional future tense demonstrating what is happening and what the reader *could* be experiencing.
e.g. The fishing *is* excellent. . . Keen fisherman *will* find that the . . . water fishing is excellent.
(ii) The text layout is formal and easy to read (typed), with different fonts so that certain sections of information can be clearly identified. In this case, the largest letter types are the name of the destination (Harvey) and the 'information and bookings' which act to let the possible clients know who they should get in contact with. A list is also provided of all the exciting things to do in Harvey.
(iii) The language use has to be aimed at a specific market in order to attract the reader. The text must therefore act to inform the possible client but not be filled with unnecessary information that would put the client off , suggesting the importance of an economic use of space. This text is in three paragraphs which each emphasize a different important element of Harvey: not a word is wasted.
(iv) The structure of the text, in contrast to text A, is not free, and the change of subject must be carefully thought out so that the line of conversation is held and so that the reader is led to read the entire text.

TENOR

Tenor refers to the relationship between the parties involved in a particular communicative event.

Text A. This text is aimed most certainly at specified individuals who are in friendly contact with one another, suggesting an informal tenor. This certainly has consequences for the structure of the text and the type of language used. Firstly, the writer *assumes* a certain degree of knowledge from the reader (demonstrated by the use of the single letter 'signing off' form that implies that the reader will be directly aware of the identity of the writer). Secondly, there is an informal observation of vocabulary. The writer, for example, cuts words short which demonstrates the written expression of slang: *altho', tho'* etc.

Text B. This text is considerably more formal than text A primarily because it is not aimed at an individual but rather at an unspecified audience. As such, English constructions have to be used that will firstly make sense to all readers and most importantly will not alienate a particular social group because of the use of slang. At the same time, an advertisement cannot be too formal or it will put off possible readers. The language used is flowery and extended, designed to attract the reader, treat him/her as if he/she is already at the destination being advertised.
e.g. *the hills are ablaze with wildflowers*

MODE

'Mode' refers to the particular communication channel being used and the function the language is being used for. Also involved is the organization of discourse, that is, the links that exist between sentences within a cohesive, coherent stretch of language.

Text A. The text is essentially written, but in belonging to the 'postcard' field in which the writer fills as much information as possible as quickly as possible into a tiny space, a spoken style is adopted which is actually not permitted in many other styles of writing, even letter writing.
e.g. *Quite a few Aussies and Germans in town*   in comparison to *There are quite a few Australians and Germans in town.*

As an extension of this, we can sense that the grammatical rules are not strictly followed; the most important thing is to get the message across in as few words as possible. Therefore the text has only to be coherent for a particular reader, meaning that a great deal of assumed knowledge is required.

Text B. The mode is again written, but in comparison to text A it is a well thought out construction that has a clearly designed purpose; attracting prospective holiday goers. This is represented by its formal observation of grammar rules and therefore a clear awareness of text cohesion, and at the same time an illocutionary development structure that will induce the reader to act on the contents of the advertisement.