# DISCOURSE STRUCTURE IN READING

by Ron Shook

*This is the second part of a three-part article by Professor Shook.*

In the first part of this paper, I discussed the relationship that exists between reading, linguistic maturity, and cognitive skills. I concluded that the ESL reader is rather a special case, because although he is unlearned in the English language, he is often a fully mature reader in his own language, and brings to his reading classes a well developed set of perceptual and cognitive skills. This puts him in an interesting and anomolous position, because he needs reading materials, and especially exercises, that will satisfy these mature cognitive skills without overwhelming him linguistically. Sadly, this is not the case with much of the reading material (and exercises) we use with our ESL readers. Rather than being overwhelmed with linguistic complexity, they are being underwhelmed with linguistic simplifications which they haven't had to deal with since they were children. I suggested in part one that there were three areas of the reading process which concerned me especially. They were,". . . a profusion of detail as question fodder 2) an over-simplified syntax, and 3) an artificial construction that violates the principles of civilized discourse." In the balance of part one I discussed the problem of extraneous detail. In this part of the paper, I shall concern myself with problems (2) and (3) as noted above.

## SYNTAX MADE SIMPLE

In deciding what level of syntax to use with a beginning ESL reader, (or any beginning reader, for that matter), there are two interrelated questions that should be considered. They are: 1) what level of difficulty can the student process at all? How many subordinate clauses or coordinations will he be able to handle before he loses the thread of the discourse? Put another way, we might ask, how many transformations can a student handle? It is often the case, for instance, that an ESL student has no trouble with a question transformation, changing [Steven past go wh+NP] into "Where did Steven go?", but when that same student has to embed the question in another sentence, he will formulate something on the order of, "Harry asked where did Steven go?" indicating some sort of syntactic or semantic overload.

The second question that needs to be asked is, "What *kinds* of structures (embeddings, clauses, transformations) are likely to inhibit processing of material?" We should not only be asking questions about quantity, we should be asking them about quality. Conversely, teachers could be asking themselves, "Are there any structures that can actually *make* the student's job easier?" Rather than seriously asking either of these two questions it appears that scholars have simply decided that *short is beautiful,* and have created very simple, beads-on-a-string sentences for their reading exercises, even when such sentences are like nothing the student will ever encounter in the real world.

Of course, it is possible to put a virtual halt to a passage of text by injudicious embedding, such as Jeremy Bentham does in this magnificent example of snarled prose:

> (1) By a man's connexions in the way of support, are to understood the pecuniary assistances, of whatever kind, which he is in the way of receiving from any persons, who, on whatever account, and whatever proportion, he has reason to expect should contribute gratis to his maintenance.

On the other hand, it is equally possible that well written prose, though complicated in the sense of having multiple propositions embedded, is not only not difficult to read, but can have the effect of pulling the reader along, easing his job. Consider the following

paragraph from Hans Zinzer's *Rats, Lice and History* (for which I am indebted to David E. Eskey, 1973):

(2) When all is said and done, we have no satisfactory explanation for the disappearance of plague epidemics from the Western countries and we must assume that in spite of the infectiousness of the plague bacillus, the plentifulness of rats, and their invariable infestation with fleas, the evolution of an epidemic requires a delicate adjustment of many conditions which have, fortunately, failed to eventuate in Western Europe and America during the last century.

This sentence is 77 words long, about half again as long as the Bentham sentence, yet immeasurably easier to understand. An analysis of both sentences would give a partial answer: Bentham is full of center and right branching structures, and obscure passives, tends to double back on himself, whereas the Zinzer paragraph proceeds steadily in one direction.

The difference, then, is not complexity vs. simplicity, but the *way* a sentence is complex. If, for instance, we have a pair of sentences like the following:

(3) Judy loved her mother. Her mother lived in New Jersey.

It is no favor to the adult reader, no matter how unsure of the language he may be, to leave them in that form. Rather, it would be better to combine them into something like:

(4) Judy loved her mother, who lived in New Jersey.

In this case, the relative clause, rather than hindering the processing of the sentence, is more liable to further it. Part of the mnemonic value of structures such as:

(5) This is the cow
that tossed the dog
that chased the cat
that killed the rat
that ate the cheese
that lay in the house
that Jack built.

is in the structure. The relatives are strung together, each one contributing to the next. This is a plus for the reader.

Let me now turn to an exercise used at my school for testing reading skill. The test of the reading exercise is as follows:

(6) In ancient Hawaii no one owned the land. It belonged to the gods. The high chiefs were the caretakers of the land. Each high chief divided the land among his chiefs. It was for their use. But they did not own it. The common people worked the land. They made crops grow. But they never thought of owning the land any more than they thought of owning the ocean.

While today it is fashionable to pooh-pooh the *dicta* of traditional prescriptive grammar, it can be seen here that there is some rationale for saying that one should never begin a sentence with the word *but*. The sixth sentence, "But they did not own the land," is clearly connected to the sentence before it by a much closer tie than is indicated by the period and new sentence. They are tightly related contraries and to express them as one sentence not only shows this elegantly, but helps the reader to assimilate the relationship. And would it be too hard to understand the sentence, "It was for their use." if the *it was* were deleted and the resultant clause attached to the foregoing sentence? I really don't think so.

If we were to do some elementary editing, the passage might read as follows:

(7) In ancient Hawaii no one owned the land for it belonged to the gods. The high chiefs were the caretakers of the land. Each high chief divided the land among his chiefs for their use, but they did not own it. The common people worked the land and made the crops grow. But they never thought of owning the land any more than they thought of owning the ocean.

The changes made in the example are all minor, and none disrupts the natural flow of the elements of the paragraph. Yet the second paragraph is much smoother. The relationships of propositions inside the paragraph is more clear, thanks to the inclusion of such words as *for* and *and,* and the combining of a couple of sentences. Note too that the word for makes explicit a relationship that in the earlier paragraphs

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had to be inferred. If, though, we decide that the only good sentence for a beginning ESL reader is a short sentence, then paragraph (7) is hopelessly bad. For, though the content is exactly the same, and the order of elements is the same, paragraph one had 7.5 words per sentence, and paragraph two has 14.

**To sum up:** although it is entirely possible for sentences to be too complex for a beginning ESL reader, it is also possible for them to be too simple. This too-simple syntax inhibits the reader, slows him down as much as a too-complex one would. We need to constantly remind ourselves, I think, that an ESL reader may have had considerable practice in dealing with embeddings in reading his own language, and is cognitively prepared for them. It is stifling to have to settle for Dick and Jane prose when the mind and eye are trained for something more.

**The final part of this three-part article will appear in the next issue of TESL Reporter.**