

DISCOURSE STRUCTURE IN READING

by Ron Shook

(This is the third and concluding part of "Discourse Structure in Reading")

In earlier sections of this paper I have discussed two problems I feel ESL reading exercises often have: an oversimplified syntax and a proliferation of useless detail. In this final section of the paper I would like to discuss what is perhaps the most important of the objections I wish to make, but at the same time the least amenable to analysis, and that is the reading exercise as a discourse unit.

To construct an acceptable sentence in English is one thing, but to construct an acceptable sequence of sentences is quite another. When two sentences have nothing in common, it is easy to see that good sentence A and good sentence B cannot simply be jammed end to end to form discourse. When we read, "What were you doing last night? I like butter on my toast." we realize that something is wrong. However, there are more subtle problems which can befall a series of sentences, such that it can become difficult or even impossible to make sense of them.

Specifically, there are two problems I feel ESL reading exercises suffer from, and I am going to call them problems of *coherence* and problems of *inference*.

Coherence

In an earlier section of this paper (Spring 1977), I noted that syntax was important to an understanding of reading. At that time, I was primarily concerned with the syntax of the sentence. Much the same approach will be seen in this section of the paper, but the focus will be on the syntax of the paragraph—an until recently neglected area of linguistic research.

We normally think of a paragraph, or any discourse unit above the level of the sen-

tence, as a series of sentences devoted to the expansion of what is basically a single idea. The expansion may take several forms,—the expository modes: narration, description, cause and effect, comparison and contrast, and the like. These various developmental schemes have a number of things in common, and one of the most important, and least understood, is that they use the same intersentential syntax to achieve coherence. That is, no matter how different the structure of a paragraph may be, the sentences will be bound together by a limited number of transitional elements.

These transitional elements may be explicit or implicit. If implicit, they can be made explicit by the addition of certain words or phrases. Implicit transitional devices, I think it can be seen, require that the reader and writer share a lot of knowledge and require also that the writer be possessed of some degree of skill.

The nature and function of these transitional devices is very well illustrated in an article by W. Ross Winterowd, entitled "The Grammar of Coherence" (1973), in which he suggests that there are really only seven relationships that can hold between sentences, and that each of these relationships has a sign, usually a word or phrase, by which it can be expressed. The seven relationships, are as follows:

1. **Coordination.** The normal pattern of discourse. May be expressed by *and*.
2. **Obversitivity.** Reverse of flow of propositional content. May be expressed by *but*.
3. **Causitivity.** Statement of cause/effect relationship. May be expressed by *for*.
4. **Conclusivity.** One proposition is the conclusion of an inductive or deductive sequence. May be expressed by *so*.

5. **Alternativity.** One proposition weighed against another. May be expressed by *or*.
6. **Inclusivity.** One proposition is included in another. May be expressed by the colon.
7. **Sequential.** One proposition is logically or temporarily prior to another. Expressed in adverbs or phrases.

As an example of how this "grammar of coherence" may work, let us use Winterowd's seven categories as a heuristic, and apply it to a reading exercise gleaned from a venerable source, the McCall-Crabbs reading series. Consider the following paragraph:

(1) Protected by a wall of sand and glass, a man was working with radioactive materials. (2) A pellet about the size of a match head cracked, releasing a small amount of dust. (3) A little breeze carried this hot dust over the wall. (4) A red danger signal flashed. (5) An alarm bell rang. (6) The man tore off his uniform, jerked open a locker door, grabbed his street clothes, ran out of the room, and quickly took a shower bath. (7) He did not realize that his street clothes too were now carrying some of this death-bearing dust.

Notice that there is no overt indication at all that Winterowd's transitional devices are being used to establish the relationships between sentences. Each sentence stands by itself, connected to its neighbor only by such tenuous threads of continuity as are provided by propinquity and chronology. The paragraph is, in the vernacular of the composition teacher, "choppy."

But it is more than that. It is also confusing to the reader, because the flow of ideas is halting at best. In this paragraph there are propositions arranged not only in a definite concrete spatial order, the words on paper, but in a definite abstract developmental order. The problem with this paragraph is that the concrete order does not help establish the abstract.

Let us apply such of Winterowd's seven categories as they may fit, and see if this abstract order can be made clearer. It is clear, for instance, that the relationship between sentences (1) and (2) is a sequential one, and could be expressed by adding *suddenly* to the beginning of sentence (2). Sentences (2) and (3) also form a sequential relationship, which is the normal sentence pattern for time-oriented discourse. It also partakes somewhat of the nature of a coordinate relationship, as they are very close, and both may be expressed by the use of *and*. However, the pattern departs significantly in the relationship between sentences (3) and (4). This is a *causitive* relationship. That is, sentence (3) doesn't only occur before sentence (4), the events in (3) caused the events in (4) to happen. For the development of the paragraph, this is important, yet it is not signalled in any way in the discourse. The relationship between sentences (4) and (5) is obviously one of coordination, and why the two were not made one sentence is a mystery. (As a matter of fact, this harks back to an earlier point in this paper when I was discussing the childish syntax of reading exercises). With the relationship between sentences (5) and (6) we are back to a cause and effect relationship. If we count the unfortunately awkward sentences (4) and (5) as one sentence, we see a pattern emerging. Not only do we have events happening in time, but we have each event being caused by the one before it, and in turn causing this one after it. This pattern is continued in sentence (6), which is a series of intrasentential causitive propositions. However, with the relationship between sentences (6) and (7), there is a major break in the pattern. This relationship is an obversive one; it is a pattern of change, of reversal of expectations expressible by *but*.

In short, the paragraph contains a series of causitive relationships culminating in a single, climatic reversal. Rather, it *should* contain such a series. To the beginning reader, however, I am afraid it may be just a series of isolated propositions stacked together like bricks without mortar. The paragraph doesn't cohere. Because it doesn't cohere, though single facts may be understood, the sense of the whole paragraph may

(continued on page 13)

DISCOURSE STRUCTURE IN READING

be lost.

The lack of coherence in discourse, then, is more than an impediment to grace and style, more than awkwardness, more than choppiness. When we remember that the flow of sentences is very closely connected to the flow of thought, we can understand that lack of coherence in discourse may not only contribute to lack of coherence in the thought, but may block the emergence of the thought altogether.

Inference

If we could rebuild choppy writing by plugging in the appropriate transitions and introductory clauses, the problem would be easily solved. However, it isn't as simple as that, because there is another facet to the dilemma. Although the writer may or may not place conscious signals to the reader in the form of transitional devices, discourse also operates on a much more subtle level—that of inference.

Inference, the term I have chosen, designates a class of shadows, the things the reader draws out of the writing, whether the writer intended him to or not; whether the writer wants him to or not. They are an amalgam of the reader's reference frames, information store, ignorance or knowledge, personal construct of the universe, emotional balance, time, country, religion, family, education, and a host of others. To deal with them in this paper is not possible, and the reader is advised to consult some of the very good works on speech act theory or linguistic pragmatics.

However, there is one area of inferences that I can touch on lightly, and that is *formal inferences*. In American English prose nonfiction, for example, there are certain formal requirements. Some things may be done, and some things may not be done. Keith Fort, for instance, in his "Form, Authority, and the Critical Essay" (1971) suggests that form exerts a sort of tyranny

over what is acceptable and what is not. The writer may say anything he wishes, as long as he observes the proper formal constraints. Fort is saying that the reader's expectations dictate the form the writer may use.

Although Fort calls this a tyranny, it is not. Rather, it is a contract between reader and writer. This contract consists in a number of agreements between reader and writer about what will pass between them. Since so much of reading occurs in the mind rather than on the page, such a series of agreements is vital. By the same token, when these unspoken agreements are not kept, then much of the presuppositional structure on which discourse is based is lost. If the writer disappoints the reader's formal expectations, then the communication suffers.

Form in discourse, Burke tells us (1953) is "the arousing and fulfilling of desires." In order for a piece of writing to be formally adequate then, it must fulfill those desires it has aroused. One does not bring something into a piece of text that has no business being there. One does not raise a point and then ignore it. One does not skip hither and thither in either time or space without some sort of motive.

Let me give an example of what happens when this formal code is broken. I would like to use a reading selection from Samuels and Edwall (1975).

Lost in the Woods

John and Bill carefully slid their boat onto the muddy land. They jumped ashore followed by their dog. For hours the boys and their dog wandered through the woods looking for the beaver pond. As the sun started to set John and Bill became aware they were lost. Bill called the dog and told him to go back to the boat. The dog sniffed at the trail as he ran through the woods and in a short time led them back to the boat.

Samuels and Edwall are concerned with the nature of the questions that are asked after the reading exercise, but I

want to concentrate on the text itself. Note that it proceeds in a number of discrete steps, which can be summarized as follows:

1. The boys land.
2. The boys search for the beaver pond.
3. The boys become lost.
4. The dog leads the boys back to the boat.

The reader who expects continuity in this text will be disappointed. To be sure, it has a continuity of sorts. Things do happen in a kind of chronological order, but the writer has held out and then ignored several promises to the reader. The competent reader would include these among his expectations of what the text should reveal. On the basis of these promises and hints, he would then seek fulfillment and clarification in the text. Such fulfillment is not forthcoming. The glaring example is the fact that the boys spent all those hours searching for the beaver pond; had come all this way to find it. The search for the pond, we infer from its position, is a central idea in the text. Yet it never comes up again.

Note the procedure: the writer implies, the reader infers. The reader, on the basis of the discourse creates a theoretical structure of meaning. He guesses what the meaning of a piece of text might be, and then confirms or rejects that hypothesis as he progresses. Early in this little piece, the reader infers that the beaver pond is going to be important. He puts this information into short term memory, and then because STM fades quickly, he must keep recycling it, renewing it, while he waits for confirmation. The two items: *Beaver pond*, and its syntactically derived importance, thus become impediments to the assimilation of information. They become "noise." The writer has made a promise to the reader which he has not kept. The reading has a formal flaw. Beyond being irritating, such behavior frustrates any attempt to set up the correspondences and hierarchies which are so necessary to reading.

Conclusion

What I have been saying in this paper

can be easily summarized. *In order for something to be a piece of good reading, it must be a piece of good writing.* My experience with reading exercises and tests has been that they are often too short, unorganized, sloppy, choppy, and in general formally inadequate.

Perhaps I have been unduly pessimistic in my analysis of the present state of the art, but I have not found any set of reading exercises that I consider fully acceptable to mature ESL readers. It may well be that there are several excellent sets of reading exercises or texts floating around for ESL students that I am not aware of. But I will continue to remain pessimistic because the objections that I have made to reading exercises come not from my research into reading theory, but from research in other fields, especially psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, syntactic theory, linguistic pragmatics, semantics, discourse theory, and rhetoric (classical and modern). Until we bring the focus of these disciplines to bear on reading, we may have to wait a while longer for the perfect reading exercise.

Postscript

(added with the permission of the editor)

If any of the readers of the *TESL Reporter* think they have the perfect (or a very good) set of exercises or texts, why not send the bibliographical information to me c/o the *TESL Reporter*? I will review and try them out, and if the list is large enough, perhaps write up a bibliography for inclusion in a future issue of the *TESL Reporter*.

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