MODIFICATION AND DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

A Quasi - Editorial

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1. Robert Longacre's challenge, in this issue, to Bloomfield's definition of the sentence as a maximum independent unit on the grounds that "sentences occur within paragraphs and discourse and betray the fact that they are embedded within context" echoes my own long-held conviction that the linguist's preoccupation with sentence structure has unduly narrowed his field of investigation.

While training teachers of English as a first or second language, I have spent many hours analysing sentences lifted from a variety of texts and have lectured on English sentence structure year after year. All this time I have felt uneasy about the validity of the grammarian's effort to crack the code of language via the dissection of the sentence, via the formation of rules on how the constituent parts of sentences are organized.

I was afraid that in developing elaborate procedures for turning sentences inside out, for regrouping constituents, for deducing deeper and deeper structures beneath the surface, we have come to ignore the forest on account of the multitude of trees.

Scanning the linguistic scene even from so far away corner of the world as Papua and New Guinea, I can sense that this preoccupation with sentence structure is on the decline, that the key word for linguists is fast becoming "discourse analysis", a logical step after the recent welcome rediscovery of semantics.

Admittedly, it may have been necessary not so long ago to ignore the message conveyed by a unit of communication in order to pay maximum attention to the way in which the message was constructed, and sentence grammar may have had to be explored before the linguist could turn to the examination of discourse units.

The vigorous pursuit of semantic and discourse analysis is widening the scope of linguistic research enormously. The linguist is now engaged in tackling the more elusive problems of communication. It is to be hoped that eventually his work

will complement that of the literary critic on an equal basis.

2. A. A brief glance at the notion of modification may illustrate how I conceive the shift in emphasis from sentence to discourse analysis.

Robert Allen, in his description of the sector analytical method as applied to English, defines a modifier as "a unit (word or construction) which "goes with" the nucleus of a cluster (i.e. endocentric construction) either preceding it as a pre-modifier or following it as a post-modifier ... In general, then, the modifiers of the nucleus of a cluster are droppable units on the same level as the nucleus; the nucleus itself, however, is not droppable." (R. Allen, English Grammars and English Grammar, New York: Macmillan, 1964, p. 27, mim).

Further on, he describes modifiers on the sentence level as not only droppable but usually also shiftable from the beginning to the end of the sentence and vice versa.

Both these criteria of modifiers are by and large valid if we are examining sentences in isolation, if we view them as linguistic jigsaw puzzles where the pieces have to match but the identity of the total picture is immaterial as long as it does provide an acceptable pictorial representation of something.

Let us pursue this analogy further.

The number of windows in the jigsaw picture of a castle is unimportant; we can leave out a window or two from the picture and the castle will still remain a castle. Nor will it matter whether the castle is portrayed on the east or west bank of a river.

But in a story where the prince hurrying to the rescue of the heroine must cross the river first, the location of the river relative to the castle will no longer be unimportant. Nor can we arbitrarily dispose of that small window in the turret through which the prince manages to enter.

Similarly, the adjective "old" may be optional in:

(1) "Remove these old men!"

but can be dropped only as a demonstration of how the jigsaw picture of the sentence can be altered without destroying it.

In a narrative where all the men in a village have been captured as hostages by the Nazis, and the German officer orders his soldiers to

(2) "Remove these old men!"

before the hostages are put to death, the 'modifier' is an essential part of the sentence.

B. It is worthwhile teaching the foreign learner at an early stage that he cannot drop ' on the floor ' in the sentence:

(3) Mrs. Baker put an egg on the floor

because the resulting fragment is ungrammatical in English.

However, to follow this rule with one according to which the same expression can be dropped in

(4) Mrs. Baker dropped an egg on the floor

because the sentence remains grammatical even without the prepositional phrase, may easily lead the student astray.

First, it is the differing meanings of the verbs put and drop that should tell him that he cannot leave out the direction, whether up, down, aside, on the chair or whatever, in which he intends to put an object because put has no indication of direction. Drop, on the other hand, implies that the direction is downward and, on hearing

(5) Mrs. Baker dropped an egg

the hearer will, in the absence of further information, automatically conclude that she dropped it on the floor if she was indoors, or on the ground if she was outdoors.

Secondly, Mrs. Baker's dropping the egg in the sink as opposed to on the floor may be quite important if her pet dog happens to be crouching in a corner from where he can readily leap to devour the egg dropped on the floor but will not be able to do so if the egg was dropped in the sink.

Thirdly, and here we come to the heart of the matter, we must explain to our student that the principle of droppability can only be applied with profit if he himself is the communicator. In constructing an utterance the speaker-writer is at liberty to omit certain details he considers superfluous. Such omission is not restricted, however, to modifiers. For instance, in the sentence

(6) My purse has been stolen

compared with

(7) Somebody has stolen my purse

the speaker, by omitting an overt reference to an actor, will have toned down the harshness of his accusation.

It seems to me equally important to teach our students, especially non-native speakers, that the author's right in constructing his text in whatever way he pleases must be respected. It follows then that a complete utterance must be examined as it stands without any suggestion that certain parts may be dropped or shifted around.

3. For the examination of units of discourse we should, perhaps, revise our very definition of modification.

Most types of discourse, apart from unedited conversation, contain both a title for the text and the text itself. We ought to regard the title as the nucleus and the text the enlargement, the amplification of the title. On the discourse level, then, modification will equal "enlargement, amplification."

For example, the significance of the title, "Moby Dick", in Melville's novel is only understood by the reader after he has read the entire text.

The next highest level below that of an entire novel, drama or treatise is the chapter. Again we will find that the title of the chapter tells us what the chapter is about, while the text itself is an amplification of the nuclear meaning yielded by the title.

Between the chapter and the paragraph, the last unit on the discourse level, intermediate units such as sections, subsections, etc. may be encountered each with or without a title of its own. In quite a few novels, short stories, etc. not even the chapters themselves are provided with titles.

It is, of course, the writer's privilege to leave the semantic nucleus of any part of his work unstated or even ambiguous. However, a careful reading of the part concerned will invariably reveal the semantic nucleus of the passage.

Paragraphs themselves are very rarely provided with titles. It would make any written work appear excessively choppy and divided if each paragraph carried a title of its own.

Apart from narrative paragraphs where chronological structure militates against the establishment of a formal centre, the semantic nucleus of the paragraph has shifted

to the so-called topic sentence.

Whether a topic sentence is provided or not, all well-formed paragraphs have a semantic nucleus amplified either by the rest of the sentences in the paragraph if the nucleus is in the topic sentence, or by all the sentences in it, if the nucleus is unstated.

Paragraph structure has been discussed in countless books on rhetoric and composition. As linguists, we should make use of the wealth of information provided in these works and utilize them for our purpose, the description and analysis of the intimate interconnection between discourse and sentence analysis.

4. It is not my intention in this quasi-editorial to explore all the ramifications of this interconnection. Let us, however, briefly examine a short article from a recent issue of Time Magazine (2,22,71) which, although of paragraph length only, has been provided with a title.

> Process of Elimination
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> It took just two years of concentrated effort to perfect the first primitive atomic bomb. It is taking decades since the first efforts began for the superpowers to formulate even modest controls on the Bomb. There was the partial test ban agreed to eight years ago. Then came pacts to keep nuclear arms from Latin America and outer space and to prohibit the distribution of weapons to nations that did not already have them. Last week the U.S., Russia and 60 other nations signed a treaty barring the installation of nuclear weapons on the ocean floor. If this slow process of elimination continues, there may even be an agreement some day concerning the thousands of missiles that the rivals have now aimed at each other.

The title itself sets up two expectations in the reader. He wants to know what is being eliminated and also what are the stages in the "process of elimination."

The writer intorduces a contrast first, that between the relatively brief period needed for perfecting the bomb and the overlong period - still continuing - needed to eliminate its deadliest potential consequences.

The obvious means to present this contrast is parallel structure. Accordingly, the first two sentences are presented in parallel:

In both sentences "It" is the anticipator of the topic which is delayed till the

end of the sentence for maximum effect.

The parallel is continued in the juxtaposition of "took just two years" with "is taking decades."

The next three sentences illuminate stages in the "process of elimination". A new parallelism is introduced to present them.

No. 3 There was A eight years ago

No. 4 Then came B and C

No. 5 Last week "those concerned" signed D

In No. 3 "there" is another anticipator of the delayed topic "a partial test ban".

In No. 4 "then" is an inverter, allowing the writer once more to delay his topic till the end of the sentence.

In No. 5 the parallelism is partially violated for a good reason.

The topic here becomes "last week" which deserves this elevation from a mere time indicator because it is the recency of the last event that has prompted the writer to compose his brief note.

In No. 5 the comment provides the hitherto unknown piece of information to the reader.

In No. 6 the last sentence, the reader is redirected to the title which the writer follows up by a conditioned prognosis of an imagined future event.

The above is by no means a full description of the many correlations between the structure of each sentence in the article and the way they are manipulated to convey the writer's message in the most effective way on the level of discourse. I hope that it has served to illustrate that the structure of individual sentences should be examined in relation to their role in the higher level unit of discourse in which they appear.