



Distinctions & Dichotomies

Distinctions & Dichotomies explores pairs of linguistic and pedagogic terms. In this article **Raphael Salkie** distinguishes Sentence from Text.

Sentence and Text

Sentence

Most people know what sentences look like, but it isn't easy to say precisely what a sentence is. One traditional definition says 'a sentence is the complete expression of a single thought', and that is helpful some of the time. But suppose I say to my cat, 'Come here, Mabel'. Is that a single thought or two thoughts separated by the comma?

A better way to think about sentences is to start with words. A sentence is a series of words, but not every series of words forms a sentence. In English, the order of words is crucial: *Ruby saw the cat* is a sentence, but *Saw cat the Ruby* is not - it is ungrammatical. English has rules of grammar which determine how words combine with other words to form sentences. These rules deal with how words combine to form phrases, and how phrases combine to form sentences. A sentence can be defined as the largest group of words to which the rules of grammar apply.

Coherence

Obviously, though, there are patterns in language that go beyond individual sentences. Just as the order of words in a sentence is crucial, the order of sentences is a vital part of how language is used in a text.

If we take the first paragraph of this article and reverse the order of sentences, we get:

Is that a single thought or two thoughts separated by the comma?

But suppose I say to my cat, 'Come here, Mabel'. One traditional definition says 'a sentence is the complete expression of a single thought', and that

is helpful some of the time. Most people know what sentences look like, but it isn't easy to say precisely what a sentence is.

Each sentence taken individually is grammatical, but the sequence is now incoherent. When we look at units larger than a sentence, one of the basic problems is to decide why some are coherent and some are not. In our example paragraph we can pick out particular words which create coherence in the original version, such as the word that in the last sentence. You will have understood that the word refers back to 'Come here, Mabel' in the previous sentence. In the jumbled version it is not clear what the word that refers back to.

Text

So one way of understanding the word 'text' is to say that a text is a coherent sequence of sentences. Text Analysis investigates the resources that a language uses to create coherence. Much of the time, coherence is about creating links between different parts of a text: when we read a text we build up a picture in our mind of what it is trying to say. The more we can find explicit links in the text between different parts of the picture, the easier it is to construct the picture as a whole.

Coherence can be made explicit by words that build links between sentences and across sentence boundaries. Examples include *that*, *but*, and *do* (as in 'They often *do*') and *so* (as in 'I thought *so*'). Expressions like *indeed*, *however*, *despite this*, *firstly*, and *therefore*, also help a reader to understand the connections between different parts of a text. Repeating key words (in the first paragraph notably *sentence* and *thought*), and contrasting words such as *single*



and *two* in the same paragraph are other ways of signalling cohesion. Instead of repeating words we can sometimes leave them out the second time (this is called ellipsis): in the first paragraph I could have written, *Is that a separate thought or two, separated by the comma?*, leaving the reader to understand *two* as two thoughts. Far from making the text harder to understand, skilful use of ellipsis requires a reader to look nearby for clues, in order to work out which words have been omitted, and this can make for better comprehension of a text.

Text in teaching

Words and structures which signal cohesion are called *cohesive devices*.

They enable us to make sense of a text when reading it and to make our sense clear when

writing a text. Decoding cohesive devices is an important reading skill; using them naturally and appropriately is an important writing skill, increasingly so at more advanced levels.

If your students write texts which are grammatically impeccable (at sentence level) but whose overall text structure is confused, you need to help them. Take a look with them at the links, or lack of them, between the sentences and the parts of the essay. Elicit different ways to make these links explicit, either by lexical choices or grammatical choices. Point out to them examples of cohesive devices as you read texts together. This way you will be teaching text grammar and not only the grammar of sentences.

Much work in Discourse Analysis and Text Analysis has been based on a seminal text by Halliday and R. Hasan, *Cohesion in English* (Longman, 1976). This sets out categories of cohesive devices. For clear summaries of Halliday and Hasan:

Hartley, A. *Linguistics for Language Learners* Macmillan 1982, (Chapter 10 'Text Structure').

Baker, M. *In Other Words:*

A Coursebook on Translation Routledge 1992, (Chapter 6, 'Cohesion').

Jackson, H. *Analysing English* Pergamon 1980, (Chapter 15, 'Text 2: Cohesion').

For a more general account:

Salkie, R. *Text and Discourse Analysis* Routledge 1995

Raphael Salkie has taught Linguistics in the UK, France and Zimbabwe. He now teaches at the University of Brighton, UK. Among his publications is The Chomsky Update: Linguistics and Politics.

English Teaching Professional

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