

SOFIA THE FIRST: WHAT MAKES A TEXT MAKE SENSE

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ABSTRACT

Based on the concern that in teachings, our teachers are not sure how to exploit texts, this study aims at describing what makes a text and what makes a text make sense. A literary work entitled Sofia the First has been the object of the study. The focus is on unlocking the text before analyzing its cohesiveness and its coherence. Reference and topic /comment of the text is also discussed before describing the advantages of using such literary text in teaching and learning process. The findings suggest that individual sentence has been a concern of traditional language teaching. However, in its natural state, language is not isolated sentences. Rather, it is the text that is the significant unit of language. As teachers of foreign language users, our top priority is to help learners understand and produce texts for different purposes in a variety of genres. Issues such as what makes a text and what makes a text make sense are significant to address.

Key words: text, cohesive, referent, coherence, topic and comment, literary work.

INTRODUCTION

A preliminary research in English graduate program classes suggests that in teachings, our teachers are not sure how to exploit texts. Instead, they simply used them as a vehicle for teaching item of sentence grammar. They used them to develop the skills of listening and reading. They didn't pay attention to the text-specific features of their composition. The texts are quite often unauthentic since they were written for teaching purposes. A lot of material available in published course books is sentence-based. Indeed, sentences have a relatively fixed and describable grammar. But language is realized as text. It is not isolated sentences.

They need to be encouraged to explore this rich resource with their learners. They need to be motivated to go beyond the sentence. To be more specific, they should have a better idea of what text is, how to categorize and describe them in terms of their genre, function organization and style. They should have learned how to exploit texts for language teaching purposes, how to unpack hidden messages of texts and how to use literary texts in the classroom. They need to encourage their students to cope with texts and make sense of them as well as produce them.

A few basic text-unlocking techniques can be applied to start exploiting texts for language work. Following an introduction to a text – such as one entitled “Sofia the First” – learners can be asked to count

how many sentences there are; count how many words there are and how many words are repeated; identify the word classes (noun, adjective, etc.); say how many countable nouns there are; say how many uncountable nouns there are; say how many adjectives, determiners, adverbs etc, there are; underline all the verbs; identify the tense, aspect and voice of each verb phrase; find any collocations, i.e. words that they think might co-occur

frequently (learners can check their intuition against a good learner's dictionary; find any figurative or idiomatic use of language, including phrasal verbs; identify any cohesive devices; and find any pronouns and identify their referents (ie the words they refer to).

Unlocking text

Here's an example of a text from Disney Junior channel.

Sofia the First

Sofia is a little girl with a commoner's background until her mom marries the King and suddenly she is royalty. With the help of the three fairies in charge of the Royalty Training Academy, Sofia learns that looking like a princess isn't all that hard, but behaving like one must have come from the heart.

Examples of part of speech can be found in the text above including nouns such as *Sofia, girl, commoner, background, mom, King, Royalty, fairies, heart, princess*; verbs such as *marry, learn and come*; adjectives such as *little, hard*; adverb such as *suddenly*; determiners such as *the, a, that*; prepositions such as *with, of, from*; conjunction such as *until, and, but*; pronouns such as *she, her*.

The grammar words can be found including *is, with, must, of isn't, in*. The content words include *Sofia, commoner, background, Royalty, mom, King, she, help, fairies, charge, learn, training*. Additionally, there are a number of words repeated. They include *is* which is repeated three times to put emphasis on

the tense and its contextual meaning and article *the, a*, and preposition *with*.

The noun phrases in the text can be identified including *A little girl with a commoner's background* the way of making of which is Indefinite Article + Adjective + Noun + Prepositional Phrase; *The help of fairies in charge of the Royal Training Academy* the way of making of which is Definite Article + Noun + Prepositional Phrase; and *A little girl* the way of making of which is Indefinite Article + Adjective + Noun. The verb phrases include *must, come* the way of making of which is Modal Auxiliary + Verb Infinitive; and *learns that looking like* the way of making of which is Verb + Relative Pronoun + Gerund.

The personal pronoun in the text can be found including Sofia (the name of a little girl). *One* refers to a princess and *she* refers to Sofia. The possessive pronoun includes *her mom* which refers to Sofia's mom.

The use of article includes *a* such as in *A little girl* as indefinite article which refers to a particular introduced entity; and *the* found in *The King* as definite article which refers to Sofia's father; *The help of the three fairies* which refers to the fact that Sofia grows up and is brought up by them; *The Royal Training Academy* which refers to the specific information on the place where the story goes. The prepositional phrases can be identified in the text including *A little girl with a commoner's background; with the help of three fairies; in charge of the Royal Training Academy; and from the heart.*

COHESION

The text above is made cohesive by a combination of lexical and grammatical devices. The lexical connectors include repetition and the lexical chaining of words that share similar meaning. The grammatical connectors are pronouns (*she* and *that*) and linkers (*then*). Examples of lexical repetition include *is* (three times), *the*, *a*, and preposition *with* (once each). These words are prominent in order to put emphasis the tense and its contextual meaning.

Grammatical cohesion is realized by pronouns, which refer to the reader back to

their referents, as in *her mom marries the King; she is Royalty and behaving like one must have come from the heart.* Here, the pronoun *she* in the first sentence refers back to Sofia in the same sentence. She can also refer forward as in *Sofia learns that looking like a princess isn't all that hard.*

Behaving like one must have come from the heart also demonstrates how some pronouns do not have referents in the text itself, but outside it. Thus the referent *one* is not retrievable from the text, either before or after, but refers to a kind of princess that is not described in the text. This is also a kind of cohesive device, since it binds the text to its larger context.

The term cohesion suggests the presence in a text of explicit linking word, such as *but*, *although*, *however*, etc. There is only one explicit linking word in the text: the use of *but* in the second sentence (*..., but behaving like one must have come from the heart*). In the sentence beginning *Sofia, is a little girl with a commoner's background until her mom marries the King and suddenly she is royalty, and* is an instance of conjunction. Other conjunctions are *but*, *so*, *or* and *because*. They connect clauses inside sentences. Connectors that link sentences are called *conjuncts*. They are also commonly called *linkers*. The absence of conjuncts suggests that perhaps the text is so cohesive already that it does not need them.

Another grammatical feature of the text that serves to give it internal consistency

and hence acts as a kind of cohesive device is the use of *tense*. All the main verbs in the text are in present and are unmarked for aspect (ie there are no continuous or perfect forms).

she, we, it, this, that, these and those) and articles. We have seen how pronouns refer back to previously mentioned referents. Here's is another example, from Sofia the First.

REFERENCE

Reference is such an important aspect of cohesion. Reference is commonly achieved through the use of pronouns (he,

Sofia has the incredibly powerful magical Amulet of Avalor that grants her the ability to talk to and understand animals and summon her princess friends in case she needs help with something. But the amulet is coveted by the evil sorcerer Cedric who wants its great magical power so he can use it to take over the kingdom as King Cedric the Great.

The pronoun *she* and the possessive determiner *her* have back-reference to Sofia. Back-reference is technically called *anaphoric* reference. The words *she* and *her* act like little index fingers, directing us back in the text to these first mentions. For certain stylistic effects, the referring pronoun can anticipate the referent. This kind of reference is called *cataphoric*. Apart from the in *...the evil sorcerer Cedric...* the underlined words in the text above point backward, rather than forward.

Pronouns can have referents *outside* the text, as well as inside it. The index finger can point beyond the text: we saw this with the pronoun *one* in previous example: *behaving like one must come from the heart*. Reference outside the text is called *exophoric* reference. The referent may be in the form of visual information as

the story tells how Sofia is helpful, considerate and humble.

Like pronouns, the definite article *the* can also make connections back, forward and outside the text. The second text above shows how each instance of *the* implies a previous mention of the noun that it determines. The function of *the* is to signal knowledge that is given, ie knowledge that is shared between writer and reader or between speaker and listener. Other ways of qualifying a noun so as to make it definite include the use of relative clauses, as in *the evil sorcerer Cedric who wants its great magical power*.

COHERENCE

We have looked at the way a text hangs together – how it is made cohesive. A text, however, needs to do more than simply together. It also needs to make sense. The

capacity of a text to make sense is called coherence. While cohesion is a surface feature of texts, independent of the reader, coherence, on the other hand, results from the interaction between the reader and the text.

The issue of coherence is approached from two perspectives: *the micro level* and *the macro level*. At the micro level, readers have certain expectations of how the meaning of a sentence is likely to be developed in the sentence or sentences that follow it. When these expectations are met, the immediate text will seem coherent. At the macro level, coherence is enhanced if (a) the reader can easily discern what the text is about, (b) the text is organized in a way that answer the reader's likely question and (c) the text is organized in a way that is familiar to the reader.

There are implicit logical connections and it is the feeling that the texts make sense. There are no explicit conjuncts signaling the relation between the two sentences. We take the relation on trust. The relations include additive, adversative, causal and temporal. *Additive* means that the second sentence gives details about

the statement in the first sentence. *Adversative* means that in claiming to solve the problem stated in the first, makes a contrast that could have been signaled with *however* or *but*. *Causal* means that the second sentence provides a reason for the situation or request mentioned in the first. Whereas *temporal* means that the chronological order of events (and then...) is implied, rather than explicitly stated. When two past tense sentences are placed together, we assume that the first happened before the second.

TOPIC AND COMMENT

Topic and comment are also called *theme* and *rheme*. The topic is the launch pad of the message and is typically realized by a noun phrase (the grammatical *subject* of the sentence). The comment is what the writer or speaker considers to be 'newsworthy' about the topic: what you as reader or listener need to pay attention to.

The following outline summarizes the logical relations between the sentences of the text.

(1) Sofia the First	Statement of topic.
(2) Sofia is a little girl with a commoner's background until her mom marries the King and suddenly she is royalty.	Having been announced in the title and takes theme position The topic (Sofia the First) is now given. The description that follows is the 'news' and take the rheme slot. The embedded information (<i>a little girl with a commoner's background until her mom</i>

	<i>marries the King and suddenly she is royalty)</i> predicts an answer to the question how Sofia is becoming royalty. The rest of the text in fact answers the question.
(3) With the help of the three fairies in charge of the Royalty Training Academy, Sofia learns that looking like a princess isn't all that hard, but behaving like one must have come from the heart.	The topic (Sofia) echoes part of the comment in (2) (<i>a girl with commoner's background</i>) – this suggests that (3) is the beginning of an answer to (2).
(4) Sofia has <u>the</u> incredibly powerful magical Amulet of Avalor that grants her the ability to talk to and understand animals and summon her princess friends in case <u>she</u> needs help with something	Again, the topic (Sofia) is a re-focusing of a <i>little girl with a commoner's background until her mom marries the King and suddenly she is royalty</i> thread – same topic, new comment, with the words incredible power carried over. The dynamic verbs (talk and understand) suggest a verbal and mental process is being described, and since processes usually have stages, one can predict more sentences with more dynamic words.
(5) But <u>the</u> amulet is coveted by <u>the</u> evil sorcerer Cedric who wants its great magical power so <u>he</u> can use <u>it</u> to take over the kingdom as King Cedric the Great.	<i>Amulet</i> is carried over from (4). Dynamic verb (coveted) suggests that this is part of the way signaled in (4) and anticipates further sentences with dynamic verbs, since <i>wants</i> and <i>use</i> as well as <i>take over</i> , have stages.

This analysis does not in any way exhaust the network of intertwining themes and arguments in this text. Some writers use the word *texture* to describe the combined effect of such structural features of a text.

Literary texts

The text above is a text that doesn't directly refer to the real world, but represents it. The characteristics of literary text above include the fact that the language is used expressively, ie to

express feeling and emotions; it is used playfully, ironically, imaginatively, metaphorically. The point of view of the writer may be involved; The text's meaning is partly inter-textual; it conform to and constrained by certain generic features; and it often highly valued by the culture.

From a teaching point of view, such a text has advantages over non-literary ones. First, it provides exposure to other kinds of texts and language functions; second, it offers instances of real language

use and therefore quality; third, it raises the level of challenge; fourth, it motivates learners to further reading outside the classroom; finally, it encode a lot of cultural knowledge about the society.

CONCLUSION

Individual sentence has been a concern of traditional language teaching. However, in its natural state, language is not isolated sentences. Rather, it is the text that is the significant unit of language. As teachers of foreign language users, our top priority is to help learners understand and produce texts for different purposes and a variety of genres. Issues such as what makes a text and what makes a text make sense are significant to address.

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