

DISCOURSE COHERENCE IN ENGLISH MATRICULATION ESSAYS WRITTEN  
BY FINNISH STUDENTS: SOME PRELIMINARIES

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The present paper outlines a preliminary plan for research to be started later this year to investigate certain textual features of English essays written by Finnish school-leavers for the matriculation examination. The essay (here referred to as EME) is used by the examination board as one way of measuring the English language skills of the pupils.

The use of an essay as a language test has aroused a lot of controversy, and the following kinds of question have been put forward.<sup>1</sup> Does the essay represent, in the context of the examination, an authentic communication task in terms of the writer-reader relationship? In other words, is the writing process influenced by the knowledge that the student is addressing a group of unknown examiners, who are actually interested in measuring his language skills, not his arguments? Is it really possible to measure FL mastery this way? To what extent does this form of a test share the function of the mother tongue essay, in the sense that they both require skills of organizing language and textual material for the purposes of presenting ideas? May this lead to the drilling of certain text-organizing and other linguistic features, which will be used by the writer without a genuine involvement in the task itself? If so, is the end-product really an essay?

As the above questions indicate, we are dealing with a complicated problem. The investigation to be outlined here will give no direct answers to these questions, though it may touch upon the one concerning the relationship between the mother tongue essay and the EME. The objective is to analyse a sample of EMEs in order to find an answer to the following questions: (1) What kind of linguistic coherence do the EMEs show? (2) Is there a correlation on the basis of the language used between the textual organization features of an EME and its rating? If a positive correlation is

<sup>1</sup> Some of these points were discussed by the audience at the symposium.

attested, i.e., if essays with high marks show more textual coherence than those with low marks, more questions arise. Does good mastery of the foreign language include mastery of textual coherence features?<sup>1</sup> In this case, features of textual organisation which are language-specific should become a recognised part of the FL syllabus. On the other hand, the mastery of general textual principles which are probably common to Finnish (or Swedish) and English, may now be measured twice, in the mother tongue essay (where, of course, text-oriented criteria can be used more explicitly), and in the EME. This hypothesis could be attested by comparing the types of textual organisation individual students use in the two essays.

We shall now proceed to define textual coherence for the purposes of the present investigation and to suggest ways of analysing it. Two current definitions are used as a starting-point. First, van Dijk (1977:93) defines coherence in terms of relations between sentences. According to this view, a text is coherent when "each sentence can be interpreted in relation to the other sentences of the text". In his discussion van Dijk (1977:136 ff. and 102-103) concentrates on the coherence features of the propositional content of the text, such as the ordering of the information. Widdowson (1978:28-29) emphasises another aspect of coherence, one which underlies discourse as interaction. Coherent discourse, he says, is based on a chain of communicative acts (e.g., questions and answers, requests and responses, etc.). While the emphasis in the two definitions is different, and while written and spoken language typically have different coherence features, it seems plausible that both types of coherence are needed for any discourse (see Lautamatti, forthcoming). Thus, when following any sequence of utterances, we may see the development of discourse in terms of the organisation of the propositional content and also in terms of sequences of utterance functions. The first of these can be investigated by examining lexical items and their ordering (see van Dijk 1977:136 ff.), and the manner in which the information presented in the discourse is presented as given and new. The interactional coherence, in spoken and written discourse, can be analysed in terms of the speech functions of sentences or utterances in relation to each other.

<sup>1</sup> As Jorma Tommola pointed out in the discussion, it is possible that a good mastery of the lower-level phenomena a foreign language facilitates incidental learning of textual features specific to that language by freeing extra processing capacity.

In the present paper a method of analysis is suggested which is designed to cover both types of coherence. The features to be analysed are the following.

(1) Sequences and types of sentence themes. In locating the theme of a sentence, two criteria are used (see Lautamatti 1980 for a discussion). First, non-topical material is excluded, i.e., those parts of the text which are used as organising, modal, or commentary material. Secondly, the actual thematic elements are considered to form a kind of hierarchy with major and minor themes (see Sinclair 1972). Thus, in a case like the following, the theme which relates to the discourse topic is found in the object clause, while we is non-topical:

We all know that the generation gap is not a new thing.

By excluding non-topical textual material and by focusing on the major themes, we should arrive at a progression of thematic referents which are relevant to the discourse topic, and which reflect the way the argument is structured.

(2) Textual cohesion, though symptomatic only, will give indication of the type of information ordering that the writer uses, and can therefore be used as one aspect of investigation. It is also possible that the way references are made and propositions are linked in the text varies with the skill of the writer. The analysis will be based on Halliday and Hasan (1976) with necessary modifications.

(3) Coherence based on interactional features of discourse may be investigated by examining the speech functions of consecutive sentences of written discourse. Examples of such analyses can be found in Henner-Stanchina (1980), and Tirkkonen-Condit's article in the present volume.

(4) A Further textual feature which is used for greater coherence and which may help in the analysis of sentence functions, is the way the writer uses organizing or non-topical material. Types of organizing material are discussed by Nash (1980) and Werlich (1976).

Of these types, (1), (3), and (4) will be illustrated here, as the most elusive of the four. The material is taken from two EMEs which have been picked out from a randomly chosen pile of essays having the highest (95) and lowest (55) ratings of the lot. The topic for both is The Generation

Gap. These two essays will be referred to as E95 and E55 (see Appendix). The observations are only offered here in order to clarify the concepts and methods discussed. They have no validity as any kind of "results".

First, let us look at the themes of the two essays. They form the following kind of sequences, when analysed in the manner presented above:

E55	E95
Children and their parents Parents and their children	'I' 'She' (from quotation) This
Children Parents They (= both)	It (= the gap) This problem (We = non-topical)
Children They It (formal)	People They They Feature in young people
Mother It (formal) They (referent not explicit) Mother	This (previous rheme) The gap We & It (formal)
The situation Parents They (children, rhematic)	The gap Families
The gap	

The thematic development in the two essays differs in following ways: E55 has less variation in the themes than E95. It also has more concrete themes as a whole. It only refers to the topic of the text once, in the final sentence, while E95 introduces the topic by means of a quotation and then takes up the topic itself as a theme and comes back to it at the end of the text. This rough analysis suggests that the following features might be worth analysing in the actual study:

- (a) the number of different themes against the total number of themes
- (b) the number of abstract as against concrete themes
- (c) thematisation of the discourse topic.

These features may correlate with the final grade of the essay, though it would be premature here to suggest the direction of the correlation. They may be a kind of "optimal" relationship between abstract and concrete themes, for instance, as well as optimal types of ordering of these themes, which are symptomatic of essays with high grades.

Secondly, the sentence functions of E55 and E95 form the following sequences, grouped as in the written paragraphs:

E55	E95
General statement explicitation?	Example definition alternative definition conclusion
& <sup>1</sup> counter-explicitation?	
Explicitation? Example? comment comment	General statement explicitation counter-statement explanation conclusion explicitation & explicitation
Explicitation? Example? example? comment? explicitation?	
Explicitation? Example? elaboration/comment conclusion	General statement counter statement
General statement explicitation explicitation? conclusion?	conclusion
Statement of opinion	

The relationships of adjacent sentences in E55 are more difficult to define than those in E95. Consider the following examples<sup>2</sup>:

- E52:        1. Children and their parents often have different opinions about the same matters. 2. Parents want to educate their children according to the old habits and children themselves like to be free and independent.  
              3. Children tend to be out late because all their friends do so too.

The relationship between S1 and S2 is hard to define. Is S2 just a paraphrase of S1 or is it an attempt to elaborate it further? Again, does S3 offer an illustration of S1 and/or S2? The way it opens a new paragraph would seem to give it a somewhat independent status, but otherwise it seems to be best characterised as an example. Compare this with an extract from E95:

<sup>1</sup> This sign is used to indicate the latter main clause of a sentence.

<sup>2</sup> Spelling mistakes and the most distracting morphological or syntactic

- E95: 1. "I seldom understand my mother and Mother never understands me - and she says that Grandmother never understood her". 2. This is what we today call 'the generation gap'. 3. Yesterday it was probably called 'lack of gratitude' by the elderly and 'lack of understanding' by the young people. 4. Now we know that this problem is not so much due to personal qualities as to the general development of man.

Here the consecutive sentence functions could be described as Example in S1, Definition in S2, Alternative Definition in S3, and Conclusion in S4. They form a coherent sequence, and various signals are used to indicate their functions, e.g., quotation marks, lexical choices like it was called and organising or non-topical material like now we know that.

Finally, the way the essays begin and end show a marked difference. E55 begins with a General statement and ends with the Statement of an opinion. E95 begins with an Illustration and ends with a Conclusion.

These observations suggest that in the analysis of sentence functions the following aspects may be worth taking up:

- the types of sequences of sentence functions that appear in essays with high and low marks
- the signalling of sentence functions, if any
- the types of beginning and termination used in the essays.

Thirdly, non-topical material may be an indication of underlying discourse coherence. The two essays show clear-cut differences here. E55 has two cases of non-topical material: to my mind and in fact. E95 has also, on the other hand, however, we know that, probably, seems to be, and the meta-linguistic marker this is what we call (...). We cannot, of course, conclude that rich and varied use of non-topical material necessarily makes for a good essay. Undoubtedly its use may be learned as a mere technique and so used in a superficial or meaningless way. As a language-specific phenomenon, however, this kind of material forms an interesting problem for a Finnish learner, especially if the investigation shows positive correlation with the marks of the essay.

As a text-form, the essay is a mixture of different text types (cf. Werlich 1976:72). The writer combines narrative, descriptive, expository, argumentative and/or instructive sections according to his purpose. He may vary his style and point of view to achieve the optimal effect. He aims at a mature, complex presentation of a personal view by combining different textual and other linguistic means. In short, the essay would typically seem to be a

spontaneous production of circumstances where the writer has a wide experience of life, is well-read, and has a lot of leisure at his disposal for profound consideration of different values. As a sophisticated text-form, the essay would further seem to need a long tradition of written language, and it may thus have culture-specific features. Culturally and individually, it represents the highest stage of development of written discourse. For all these reasons, its use as a language test with 18-20 year-olds makes the essay an interesting object of textual analysis.

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APPENDIX: The Essays.

E55

The generation gap

Children and their parents often have different opinions about the same matters. Parents want to educate their children according to the old habits and children themselves like to be free and independent.

Children tend to be late out because all their friends do so too. Parents prevent that because they don't want that children spend their spare time outside. They can sometimes quarrel but it helps next to nothing.

Children spend too much money and they always require more and more. They provide new clothes though in fact they don't need them. It is nice to have new clothes.

Mother would be pleased if they sometimes helped her in the kitchen. It scarcely takes long time if they do a few house works. But they don't want and so mother becomes angry and despairing.

Little by little the situation alters. Parents have not strength enough any more to fight against children. They let children do what they want.

To my mind the generation gap is not so large that nothing can be done about it.

E95

The generation gap

"I seldom understand my mother and Mother never understands me - and she says that Grandmother never understood her!" This is what we today call 'the generation gap'. Yesterday it was probably called 'the lack of gratitude' by the elderly and 'the lack of understanding' by the young people. Now we know that this problem is not so much due to personal qualities as to the general development of man.

People who are growing old are also losing their ability to change. They stick to "the old and good" and they are not as willing to change their minds as they were before. On the other hand, the most important feature in young people is to change all the time. This is necessary for their development. The generation gap seems to be inevitable. We can't force old people to keep on changing and it is not possible to prevent young people from doing so.

The generation gap causes the most difficult problems among families, because they usually consist of more than one generation and their members are constantly together. However, families can also show how generations can be combined in a satisfying way. When the members of the family admit that they are different and respect also other members' opinions the gap can be filled with the sand of understanding.