



Text Structure: Focus of Attention and Pronouns

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Introduction

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How can this be explained, formally?

Overview

- Text and Interconnectedness

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 - Focus of attention
 - Pronouns

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- Model of Text Construction
- Applications for language teaching

Text Interconnectedness

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- logical relations (connectives, etc.)
- structural coherence
- lexical coherence (hierarchical relations among lexical items)

Terminology: Focus of Attention

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Semantic role (Rose, 2004)

Order-of-mention (Gernsbacher and Hargreaves, 1988)

Pitch accent (Hirschberg and Pierrehumbert, 1986)

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Exclude:

- deictic pronouns (e.g., *I*, *you*)
- demonstratives
- *one*-anaphors

Psycholinguistic Experiment 1

Self-paced reading task

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a. Nancy could easily beat Susan in the race.

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Self-paced reading task

-
- | | | |
|-----|-------|--------------------------------------|
| a. | Nancy | could easily beat Susan in the race. |
| b. | She | won the state championship. |
| b'. | She | was frustrated and dejected. |
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Psycholinguistic Experiment 1

Self-paced reading task

a.	<div>Nancy</div>	could easily beat Susan in the race.	
b.	She	won the state championship.	faster
b'.	She	was frustrated and dejected.	slower

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a.	Nancy could easily beat Susan in the race.	
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b.	She won the state championship.	slowest
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b.	She won the state championship.	slowest
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- People prefer a pronoun in an utterance to refer to the focus of attention of the previous utterance.
- People prefer structures in which there is clearly a focus of attention.

Psycholinguistic Experiment 2

Gordon et al. (1993) use the “repeated-name penalty” experimental paradigm.

Sue went to the store.

Sue bought some fish.

Sue took the fish home.

Sue fried the fish for dinner.

Psycholinguistic Experiment 2

Gordon et al. (1993) use the “repeated-name penalty” experimental paradigm.

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If an utterance refers to the focus of attention of the previous utterance, then a pronoun should be used.

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- People prefer for an entity in the focus of attention to be referred to with a pronoun.

Cooperative Principle

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What constraints are relevant to the structuring of coreferential relations in text?

Constraint-based Model of Text Construction

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Constraint 3 Maintain the focus of attention across utterances.

Text Construction Example

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Applications in ELT

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- discourse competence diagnostic
- pedagogical guide
 - curriculum design
 - activity design

Discourse Competence Diagnostic

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Sun gave him lots of light.

Then he put off his mant.

Next, North Wind tried.

But as he didn't hot, he didn't put off his mant.

As a result, Sun was win!

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Pedagogical Guide

Writing Academic English, 3rd Ed.: “There is no fixed rule about how often to repeat key nouns or when to substitute pronouns. At the very least, you need to repeat a key noun instead of using a pronoun when the meaning is not clear.” (p. 41 Oshima and Hogue, 1999).

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Two (constructive) criticisms:

1. There *is* a fixed rule which constrains how speakers construct and hearers understand a text.
2. When do ESL learners come to recognize that the meaning of an English pronoun is not clear?

Sample Classroom Activity

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3. Examine the graphical picture.
4. How often is the end of a connector not a pronoun?
If too often, there might be interconnectedness problems.

Conclusions and Further Work

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Conclusions and Further Work

Speakers and Hearers cooperatively maintain text interconnectedness by systematically constructing or interpreting texts with respect to certain constraints.

- More detailed method for determining Foci of Attention
- Evidence of the ease/difficulty with which learners acquire knowledge of text interconnectedness in English
- Development practical methods for teaching about text interconnectedness

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