

## Text Structure: Focus of Attention and Pronouns

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Communication is said to proceed cooperatively (cf., Grice, 1975). With respect to text structure, interlocutors exemplify this cooperation in the ways they indicate what they are talking about at any given point in a discourse. Mastering these features of discourse competence can be challenging for many second language learners. Consider the following illustrative text.

1. (a) John yelled at Matt.  
(b) Then he hit John in return.  
(c) Finally, he told Matt never to talk to him again.

This text is unambiguous and semantically coherent. However, it is rather difficult for the reader to process. This is partly the result of numerous shifts in the focus of attention across the utterances—from John to Matt, and then back to John. Another problem in the text is the unnatural use of pronouns. In (b) for instance, the sequence "he hit John" would read much smoother as "Matt hit him". Psycholinguistic investigations confirm that shifts and unnatural (i.e., uncooperative) pronoun use require greater cognitive effort on the part of the reader.

Using the pragmatic concept of cooperation as a foundation and drawing on psycholinguistic research, I present in this paper a compact model of focus of attention maintenance noting the overall importance of the utterance-initial position in establishing the focus and how pronoun use interacts with this process. I also outline some classroom activities designed to raise learners' awareness of this feature of discourse competence, thereby enabling them to develop the skills necessary to construct cooperative texts and thus engender smooth communication.

## References

- Grice, H. (1975). Logic and conversation. In Cole, P. and Morgan, J., editors, *Syntax and Semantics 3: Speech Acts*. Academic Press, New York.