DISCOURSE ANALYSIS AS AN AID TO LANGUAGE EVALUATION

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1. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to study the question: 'Is it possible for me, as a non-native speaker of a language, to evaluate with any degree of accuracy the discourse quality of a text in that language?' Put more simply: 'If I am not a native speaker of Thai, or English, is there any way that I can confidently evaluate student essays, knowing that my assessment is objective, and that my remarks will help my students to improve their essay writing abilities?'

To us in our work in Bontoc in the Philippines this question has direct relevance: Can discourse studies of Central Bontoc text help me to evaluate what is well-written Bontoc language in the context of my work as a linguist? Will a Bontoc reader evaluate materials I prepare for publication, whether native-authored or translated, as well-written or poorly-written language?'

2. AN ANALOGY

Well written text resembles a beautiful mansion. The lower grammatical levels, the words, phrases, clauses and sentences, are the bricks and mortar, the floorboards, rafters, and walls.

The upper grammatical levels, the discourse grammar, are the architect's plans which give us the overall view, the layout of the rooms, passages, stairways, windows and doors, etc.

So when we look at an essay in a language not our own, how do we evaluate its structure? If we look only at the lower grammatical levels and limit our examination to words, phrases, clauses and sentences, we tunnel our vision and limit our insights, for it is quite possible to have well-constructed sentences in a poorly fabricated text. This is where discourse analysis opens windows to facilitate our understanding.

3. METHODOLOGY

In this paper we will look very briefly at a single Central Bontoc expository text entitled 'The Innana Rituals' from three theoretical perspectives. Each theory will give us a different, but complementary prospect on the complex grammatical configuration of the text.

3.1 Halliday and Hasan - Intersentential-Cohesion

In their book Cohesion in English, Halliday and Hasan (1976) encourage us to study intersentential text cohesion in terms of five aspects: reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction, and lexical cohesion.

Reference: Included within this category are personal reference, demonstrative reference and comparative reference (Halliday and Hasan 1976: 31 - 87).

Substitution: Substitution is when one lexical item is replaced by another. Halliday and Hasan discuss nominal substitution, verbal substitution, and clausal substitution (1976: 88 - 141).

Ellipsis: Ellipsis is when an item is omitted - substitution by zero. Ellipsis may also be nominal, verbal or clausal (1976: 142 - 225).

Conjunction: Conjunction, Halliday and Hasan define as '...a specification of the way in which what is to follow is systematically connected to what has gone before' (1976: 277). Conjunctions '...express one or other of a small number of very general relations' (1976: 232), for example, and, yet, so, and then.

Lexical Cohesion: Lexical cohesion is achieved by the repetition of lexical items in adjacent sentences of a text via a variety of devices: same word repetition, equivalent repetition, superordinate repetition, general word repetition and collocation (Halliday and Hasan 1976: 274 - 292).
3.2 Longacre - Spectrum and Profile of a Text

Longacre has suggested (1981: 337–359) that, in each discourse genre, be it narrative, expository, procedural, or hortatory, there is a spectrum, or range of verb forms such that, for example, in narrative, some verb forms are more active, while others are less active. So for narrative discourses Longacre would draw a gradation or cline of verb forms, with the most active higher on the cline and the less active forms lower down.

- more active
- most active verb forms used for most important events of a narrative
- active verb forms for significant events
- less active verb forms for ordinary events
- equative/stative/existential verbs
- forms for background information

Figure 1 Spectrum of Narrative Verb Forms

This ties in with what Jones and Jones wrote (1979: 3–28). In Central America they discovered that in a range of languages it was possible to formally distinguish between six different levels of information in narrative.

PEAK: the single most significant event or event sequence
PIVOTAL EVENTS: very significant events
BACKBONE EVENTS: significant events
ORDINARY EVENTS:
SIGNIFICANT BACKGROUND: especially significant background information
ORDINARY BACKGROUND: normal background information

Figure 2 Multiple Levels in Narrative

These different levels were distinguished on the basis of verb aspect, particles, clause types, and mode. These findings of Longacre and Jones are reinforced by Hopper and Thompson (1980: 251–299), who studied transitivity in text, by the use of ten different criteria. Since their findings reinforce the perspectives elaborated by Longacre and Jones and Jones, I envisage them as showing essentially the same viewpoint on text as though we were looking through a triple window.

Then Longacre, using his verb cline, goes on to draw a profile of the text, according to the value a particular verb tense/aspect has on his scale. So the text profile gives us a sketch of a text, showing us the way an author has changed the tense/aspect of his predicates from sentence to sentence in a text. This profile should confirm what we intuitively feel is happening in a discourse.

Longacre (1981) has found that texts may have a variety of shapes. They may have a single peak, or a double peak, or even a narrative peak followed by a hortative or explanatory peak.
The peak is where a speaker has his audience sitting on the edge of their chairs. It is where the speaker reaches the climax, where tension is at its highest level, and the audience waits anxiously for the solution to the complication.

The value of studying a text from this Longacre/Jones and Jones/Hopper and Thompson perspective is that we gain new insight into how a good author varies his verb tense/aspect to control the tension within a text. We also discover how an author uses particles, mode, and clause types to show the difference between peak events, significant events, ordinary events, and background information in narrative.
3.3 Hale - Effectiveness in Discourse

The third way we will look at this text is from the perspective of Austin Hale (forthcoming), whose preoccupation is to question what ingredients are required to make a text effective. He asks, 'What are the essential factors which must be present in a discourse to ensure that it will be effective and achieve its purpose? What does an author build into a text to guarantee that the hearer will respond as the author intends him to do?'

![Figure 4 Hale's Four Systems](image)

His answer is to postulate that there are four systems which work concurrently in language. The lowest system, which he calls backbone, is the series of propositions which carries forward the central line of development of the text. In narrative discourse this is events, in expository discourse, explanations, in procedural text, steps in the procedure, and in hortatory discourse, hortatory points.

![Figure 5 Backbone Propositions](image)