The Role of Pragmatic Macro-Structures in Textual Interpretation

Ibrahim Abushihab

Associate Prof. English Department, Alzaytoonah University of Jordan, Jordan

E-mail: facultyofarts2@yahoo.com

Abstract

The paper investigates the role of pragmatic macro-structure in writing a précis. Macro-structure is a theory of pragmatic representations for global discourse structure and its function is to reduce the propositions of a text by eliminating the unnecessary propositions and organize the propositions in order to produce an effective précis. Writing a précis requires making an intelligent gist of a long text. In order to comprehend the text, the reader should follow specific strategies and macro rules such as: Deletion, Generalization and construction.

Keywords: Macro-structure, Précis, Textuality, Coherence, Pragmatics

1. Introduction

Macro-structure is a semantic theory which is concerned with analyzing the components of a written product. It examines the intention of a writer and how he is conveying his message. It also focuses on the configuration and organization of ideas in a text and on the sequencing of propositions in the discourse. Hall - Mills (2010) states that "macro-structures analysis examines a writer's conveyance of meaning at the discourse level and may include measures of organization, cohesion and genre – specific text structure". (P.7)

The analysis of different kinds of discourse may be given in terms of units, categories and rules based on the semantic macro – structures of the discourse.The notion of a speech act or the illocutionary act ought to be taken into consideration while analyzing a text. Van Dijk (1977 A) relates macro - structures to coherence. He points out that coherence is not only semantic, but may also be realized by pragmatic conditions. The connections of the ideas of the text must relate to speech acts because one speech act may constitute a condition, component or consequence of another speech act.

The notion of macro-structure is also introduced in relation to the notions of schema (plan) and frames. yalcin (1994, 21) states that the "text analysis process leads text users to the identification of the main topic, how frames are developed, how an event sequence will progress (i.e. schemas), how text users or characters in the textual world will pursue their goal (i.e. plan) and how situations are set up so that certain texts can be presented at appropriate moments (i.e. scripts)".

A text is considered a logical sequence of ideas based on pragmatics and stylistics. Van Dijk (1977, B) investigates pragmatic macro -structures of a discourse in a cognitive perspective. He states that the notion of a macro - speech act is necessary in order to understand the cognitive processes involved in the planning, execution, control, interpretation and speech acts in a communicative interactions.

A text is meaningful because there is a continuity of senses among the ideas stated in it. These ideas are activated by the expressions of the text. The continuity of the senses is considered by Brown and Yule (1989) and Beaugrande and Dressler (1986) as coherence. A non - sensical text is one in which the reader can discover no such continuity, usually because there is a serious mismatch among the concepts and relations. The shared knowledge between writers and readers may lead to coherence regardless the grammatical or lexical items, as the following example shows:

A.   That's the telephone.

B.   I'm in the bath.

A. O.k. (widdowson (1978 : 29)

This example is coherent because B answers the question of A.

2. Macro - Structures of a Discourse

A macro -structure of a discourse represents the whole meaning of the text and the sequence

of ideas and propositions. As a text is read, there is a heavy load on the reader because the reader is decoding and interpreting the text and incorporating the textual propositions into his/her knowledge base. Readers who do not have an adequate amount of background knowledge on the text will have poor interpretation. The prior knowledge of the reader lets him provide coherence to the text. It permits better bridging inference on a text that is not coherent. Yalcin (1994 : 21) states that "when people receive a text, they parse it into grammatical dependencies, and at the same time, activate concepts and relations in their mind according to these dependencies. These activated concepts and relations are numerous because when one item of knowledge is activated, other items closely associated with it in mental storage are also activated." The role of the reader is to be eclectic. He chooses the required ideas that relate to the text. This process is called filtering or problem -solving. Gernsbacher and Robertson (1992) go along this idea. They state that a reader who successfully comprehends the text will build a mental representation of it. Reading a text activates memory nods, which represent previously stored ideas. Memory nods are the building blocks of a mental structure which are built by mapping incoming knowledge (e.g. sentences) onto a mental structure. Comprehension involves the mental processes which are different from a reader to another.

A macro - structure of a discourse refers to its overall meaning, and the gist of the text. Formally, a macro -structure is also considered as a sequence of propositions and is acquired by mapping, so called macro – rules, from the full text base of the discourse. In order to facilitate macro-structures, four main macro -rules are taken into consideration, namely deletion, generalization, construction and zero rule .These rules make the text explicit and coherent because they organize and reduce the ideas of the text, either during input or within the memory systems.

1- Deletion: the rule concentrates on eliminating the propositions that are not relevant for the interpretation of other propositions in the discourse. Take the following example:

The clever students who pass the exam are Jordanians.

This example contains these three propositions:

1. The students are clever.

2. They pass the exam.

3. They are Jordanians.

By using the deletion rule, the reader has the right to eliminate the propositions that are not relevant for his own interpretation. This goes along Austin's (1962) perlocutionary act which is the real effect of the text on the receiver. The reader may delete proposition (1) and (2) leaving only proposition (3) because the deletion rule can be used to eliminate the irrelevant propositions whereas selection rule is necessary for the interpretation of the text. (Van Dijk, 1980).

2- Generalization: according to this rule, a series of different propositions are summarized into a more general proposition.

Here is another example:

Sara was playing football. Fatima was jumping over a rope and Selma was drawing a house. This rule does not eliminate irrelevant propositions, but they are replaced by a more general proposition as follows:

<div align="center">The children were playing.</div>

3- Construction : according to this rule, one proposition can be created

from a number of propositions. See the following example:

Ali decided to visit his sister in the capital. He went to the bus station. He bought a bus ticket and went to a shop nearby to buy a telephone card. When he went back , the bus had left. He concluded that his watch was wrong and he was late.

From the text stated above, we can construct the following macro proposition:

Jack missed the bus.

4. Zero – rule: It is essential in all types of short discourses (one - sentence discourses). In this case macro - structure is applied because all propositions are relevant like

Go out

Here, we do not have irrelevant propositions, so zero rule is a variant of the selection one. The difference between the construction rule and generalization one is that the general proposition of the construction rule can be constructed out of the discourse. The verb "missed" in the example stated above is not mentioned in the discourse.

3. Pragmatic Macro-structures and Coherence

Macro- structures are concerned with the definition of the overall coherence of a discourse. A sequence of propositions may underlie an acceptable discourse if the sequence is macro - structurally coherent. A sequence of the discourse may be linearly coherent without being globally coherent as the following example shows:

I went to the car show and I bought a car. Its owner is an English man. He is a handsome gentleman. My brother is handsome, too

Such sequences do not have a theme or unified topic. We can make such text explicit and coherent by requiring it to have a macro- structure. The cognitive importance of macro - structures has been assessed in summarizing the discourse. The sequence of propositions with a macro -structure is necessary because the readers are unable to store the individual propositions of a discourse. In order to facilitate comprehension of the text, the readers organize and reduce the large amount of propositional information during input by applying the macro - rules of macro-structures. These macro-structures may be used later as recall cues if the reader needs the detailed information. The example stated above belong to one major proposition "I went to the car show and I bought a car."

Macro-structures do not only make a discourse explicit and coherent, but they are also

essential for planning, control and comprehending any kind of highly complex discourse like novels and symbolic literary works.

A sentence expressing a macro - structural proposition is called topical sentence. Titles often express a part of the topical sentence. Brown and Yule (1989) state that the reader can process the incoming discourse as the incombination of two activities.

First, the reader works out the propositions and builds up a composite meaning for the text (i.e. bottom - up processing). At the same time, on the basis of the context and the title of the discourse, the reader can predict what the discourse is most likely to mean (i.e. top - down processing).

The notion of the topic of the discourse gives conditions for linear coherence because at least two propositions are connected relative to a topic of the discourse. Look at this example:

I went to the bookshop and I bought a book.

The sequence of two logical propositions in this example are connected because they belong to one fact noted by the macro - proposition "I bought a book"

To conclude, macro - structure specifies what is semantically important with respect to the whole text, so that the reader can store and recall the information of the text easily. The effective way for storing the complex semantic information is to be put in the form of the most general macro - structure. The macro - structure is not fully expressed in the surface structure of the gist because some of the information may be implied and will be available by inference.

4. Macro - Structures and Précis Writing

Précis writing is defined by Webster's seventh new collegiate dictionary as a concise summary of essential points, statements or facts. A précis is a French word which means a verbal or written summary of a larger body of ideas. It is a type of summary that consists of exact reproduction of the logic, organization and emphasis of the original text. Writing a précis refers to an intelligent summary of a discourse, so the reader has to have a clear understanding of the discourse. The original text is not to be reduced in length by deleting parts of its components, but it should be a theme or summary of the text and to convey the precise intention of the writer. The précis ought to be concise, clean, united, and coherent. Thus, a précis is essential when the reader processes a lengthy text that demands careful attention to gain its summary and its topic and to be put in the minimum number of words. Writing a précis is based on cutting out all the irrelevant and unnecessary information. The reader has to be careful not to change the original meaning.

To write an effective précis, the reader is required to start with reading the text several times and carefully. Thus, he specifies the key and relevant ideas. The reader should be sure that he retains and combines the relevant points in a logical order and puts them in a paragraph smoothly. The advantage of writing a précis is to increase the student's ability to comprehend the text and to read it critically. The teachers have to teach students when to scan and when to read in depth, how to develop strategies to deal with complicated texts, and to extract the

main points of the text.

Application of macro-structures in précis writing:

The researcher suggests a reading text to be applied in terms of macro-structures framework.

An example of a reading text: Al-Ahnaf visits Mu'awiyah (Mackin (et al , 1979))

Al – Ahnaf Ibn Kais, who was one of leaders of the Islamic armies in Persia, visited Mu'awiyah, the first Umayad caliph in Damascus. The caliph shook hands with him and pointed to a soft mattress, which was laid on the floor for important visitors. Al -Ahnaf ignored the caliph's gesture and sat on a carpet spread out at some distance from the soft mattress,

Why don't you sit on the mattress? Asked the caliph.

Al – Ahnaf replied: 'commander of the faithful! Haven't you heard the advice that kais Ibn Asem Almikiri gave to his son?The caliph replied that he had not, so Al -Ahnaf told him what Alminkiri had said to his son: Don't go to see the Sultan too much in case he should grow tired of your visits and dislike you, but don't abandon him completely in case he should forget you, Don't sit on his mattress, or too near to him. Instead, always leave enough space for one or two men between you and him. For if someone dearer to the Sultan and more entitled to sit next to him comes in while you're sitting close to the Sultan, you'll have to give him your seat. This will damage your prestige.

Al - Anhaf added: "I am therefore satisfied with the modest place I've chosen because L know I can keep it if someone more worthy then I am comes in while I'm here."

The caliph was very pleased with the answer Al - Ahnaf had given to him, and said that Tamim, the tribe to which Al -Ahnaf belonged must certainly be one of the wisest.

Students ought to follow different steps in order to write an effective précis based on macro - structure frame work as follows:

1- Identify the purpose of the précis: the purpose of the précis is to summarize a text to extract the key information. It is usually necessary to reproduce the original text. Students ought to be careful not to use their own opinion or criticism. Précis ought to also be marked by clarity and precision with logical order and coherence.

2- Read the original text:
   skim the text to get an overview, then read it again carefully to identify the main theme and specify the key ideas and concepts. Each paragraph should have at least one key topic. The teacher may ask students questions and give them instructions, like:

   a- Read the title " Al-Ahnaf visits Mu'awiyah" and write three ideas you expect to find in the text (Top – Down Processing).

   b- Scan the text and write three major ideas taken from the text and determine whether or not the information you expect is there (Bottom - Up Processing).

   c- Why does the caliph want Al-Ahnaf to sit on the soft mattress? (Inferential question).

d- Do you agree with Al-Ahnaf response not to sit on the soft mattress? Why? (opinion question).

3- Write a note - form summary of each paragraph: Use the important ideas you found and omit all irrelevant material.

4- Write a précis: reproduce the text to express the summarized points more concisely and to develop them into coherent sentences, expressing all important points in a generalized form. Try to eliminate any repetition and irrelevant details.

5- Review and edit: compare your précis with the original text and be careful that it emphasizes the same points. The final précis ought to be concise, clear and coherent.

5. Sample Précis of the Text Stated Above

Al – Ahnaf, one of the leaders of Islamic armies in Persia, once visited the caliph Mu'awiyha. The caliph greated him and asked him to sit next to him. Al – Ahnaf chose to sit on a carpet which was some distance away, arguing that a man who sat too near to the caliph might have to give up his seat to someone who is more worthy or dear to the caliph than himself .The gist of the text is Al - Ahnaf wants to keep his dignity.

To conclude, if you want to write an effective précis , read the text carefully for a complete comprehension. Specify the key points. It is beneficial to underline the key words. Restate each paragraph in one or two sentences. Combine these sentences to form a short précis paragraph with logical order. Finally, revise your précis against the original text to be sure that it retains the order and propositions of the original text.

6. Pedagogical Implications

The aim of writing a précis is to increase the student's ability to think critically and transfer those thoughts to a well - organized summary. Britt and Sommer (2004:332) state that "readers who form a well -structure representation of a text will be better able to recall the content of a text and search this representation later when constructing a general understanding of the combined situation described across the text."

Précis writing requires the reader to distinguish between the irrelevant details and the central thought of the text. Lenksi (2001) assures that students should take a break while reading to solidify the text's overall representation. Taking a break leads to rich integration scores. He adds that students who are working on research papers may benefit from writing short coherent summaries of their articles.

The activities of writing précis also help graduate students create effective macro-structures in presenting their papers and articles.

In order to write a good précis, students have to gain the writing and reading skills of the language efficiently. Students cannot also write a good précis without full understanding of the original text.

Consequently, students will be assisted to enlarge their vocabulary repertoire and to focus on the text producer's intention to guide the consciousness of the receiver.

7. Conclusion

A macro - structure of a text helps the reader comprehend the highly complicated information during input. It also helps organize the information in memory. Thus, it serves as retrieval cues for more detailed information. Van Dijk (1980: 14) assures that "the function of macro-structures is to organize complex (micro)- information. Without them we would only be able to have a large number of links between information units of the local level and not to be able to form larger chunks that have their proper meaning and function."

A macro - structure of a text gives an overall meaning and the gist of the text. It also stresses the sequence of propositions which is acquired by macro -rules.

In order to make macro structures clear and coherent, the reader has to apply three main macro - rules: the deletion of irrelevant propositions that are not helpful in interpreting the gist of the discourse; generalization in which some propositions are converted into a more general proposition; construction that create one derived proposition from a number of propositions taken from the text.

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