COHERENCE IN ACADEMIC WRITING

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The first problem Enkvist (1990) outlines is the difficulty of defining the relation between cohesion and coherence. He maintains that the positivist approach
traditionally followed by linguists which has encouraged a focus on "concretely
describable entities" (1990: 11) has meant that text linguists and discourse
analysts have tended to focus on formal cohesive relations as evidence of what
combines sentences into texts.
Halliday and Hasan (1976) do not equate cohesion with texture (their term for what is usually referred to as coherence - Carrell, 1982:480), in that texture is
made up of register and cohesion which together define a text (1976:23). At the
same time they suggest that cohesive ties play an essential role in the identification of text in that " ... cohesive ties ... are the only source of texture" (Halliday and Hasan, 1976:9). Brown and Yule (1983:195) identify an ambivalence in Halliday and Hasan (1976) towards cohesive relations which they
identify as "semantic relations" (1976: 13). It is the semantic relations in a text
which are usually associated with the power to produce coherence (cf. Witte and
Faigley, 1981:202). However, Halliday and Hasan (1976) seem to suggest that it
is the explicit formal cohesive ties that create "texture" rather than the underlying
semantic relations.
De Beaugrande and Dressler (1981) who operate from a procedural point of view, identify cohesion and coherence as two of seven standards of textuality
necessary for a text to be defined as "communicative" (1981 :3). Texts which do
not communicate are regarded as "non-texts". Cohesion is defined as "the ways
in which the components of the surface text, i.e. the actual words we hear or see,
are mutually connected within a sequence " (1981: 3) . Cohesive devices operate
according to the grammatical conventions of a text and include any function
which is used to indicate a relationship.
Coherence "concerns the ways in which the components of the textual world, i.e. the configuration of concepts and relations which underlie the surface text, are mutually accessible and relevant (1981 :4). De Beaugrande and Dressler (1981) maintain that relations of coherence are not always made explicit in the text in which case readers supply the relations they need to understand the text. This
seems to suggest that formal cohesive relations are not always necessary for the
identification of coherence relations. Nevertheless, both Halliday and Hasan (1976) and De Beaugrande and Dressler (1981) seem to conclude that cohesion is an essential component of coherent text. This fact is disputed by amongst others Enkvist (1990) and Carstens (1987, 1997) who provide examples to show that cohesion is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for a text to be interpreted as coherent (Carstens 1987:27, 1997: 117 citing Brown and Yule, 1983: 194 - 199). Carstens demonstrates that a text which is linked by examples of various categories of lexical cohesion may nevertheless be incoherent if it displays no meaning relations (1987:28). Enkvist provides the following text which despite the presence of repetition links may be considered incoherent:
"My car is black. Black English was a controversial subject in the seventies. At seventy most people have retired. To re-tire means "to put new tires on a vehicle." Some vehicles such as hovercraft have nowheels. Wheels go round."(Enkvist, 1990:12) Although cohesive links are present in this text, there are no underlying semantic meaning relations and the reader, therefore, cannot derive a "consistent world picture" (1990: 12) from the text.Enkvist's second example does not provide the reader with a consistent worldpicture either. In this case the cohesive ties in the text signal links betweensentences that relate to a non-existent world."Suzie left the howling ice cube in a bitter bicycle and it melted. It soontinkled merrily in her martini. Into her drink

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she then also poured the grandpiano she had boiled in a textbook of mathematics the night before. Shechewed the martini, read the olive and went to bed. But first she took herclothes off. She then took her clothes off." (Enkvist, 1990: 12)

Neither of the above texts can be summarised or interpreted for meaning. This suggests that cohesive links are not sufficient to produce a coherent text. It is a fact, though, that readers are inclined to interpret any text as coherent and will

look for meaning relations which might suggest a plausible situation in what would

at first glance be an incoherent text. Charolles (1985:2 - 3) points to the fact that

in theory all texts are coherent in that it is always possible to conjure up a particular situation in which meaning is possible. While supporting this view in

that one could envision certain apparently incoherent texts as examples of texts from the genre of dramatic literature, Carstens suggests that one would not succeed in ascribing coherence to such texts if they were to be interpreted as informative texts (1987:29, 1997:119).

Enkvist produces a text such as the following as a contrast to those above:

"The net bulged with the lightning shot. The referee blew his whistle and signalled. Smith had been offside. The two captains both muttered something. The goalkeeper sighed for relief."(Enkvist, 1990: 12) Enkvist maintains that the difference between the above three texts cannot be explored syntactically. They are only distinguished in terms of meaning. The third text is interpretable in that a reader with a prior knowledge of soccer can create a text world which makes sense. The lexical items such as "net", "shot" and "offside" form collocational links in that they belong to the same semantic field. Widdowson (1978:29 as cited in Brown and Yule, 1983:228) provides an examplefrom a conversational sequence which appears to have no formal cohesion at all but which is readily interpretable within the genre of conversation:

A: That's the telephone.

B: I'm in the bath.

A: O.K.

Widdowson maintains that this sequence is interpretable as a conventional

sequence of utterances each performing an action. In terms of a conversational

sequence one might imagine a plausible situation in which such a conversation

might occur where A hears the telephone ring and asks B to answer it. B explains that she or he cannot and gives the reason for it and A then agrees to answer it. The fact that texts such as the one above can be interpreted with little or no evidence of formal cohesion suggests that cohesion is not a necessary condition for coherence.

Carrell (1982) who operates from a schema-theoretic orientation maintains that

the reader interacts with the text using background knowledge in conjunction with

the content and structure of the text to arrive at its meaning. She cites Steffensen (1981, as cited in Carrell, 1982:485) who maintains that "textual cohesion represents only a potential which can be fully realized only when the reader appropriately identifies the schema underlying a text". Shiro (1994:175) suggests that an important part of creating the coherence of a text is derived from the reader's ability to provide inferences to build up a textual world. The text can never be totally explicit and the reader in assuming that the text is coherent looks for the writer's intention and makes an effort to find meaning in the text by supplying the missing links in the text. Shiro (1994:176) maintains that" ... the reader's interpretation results from decoding the linguistic signs that appear in the text combined with other processing strategies based on his/her world knowledge and other cognitive abilities". Brown and Yule (1983) argue that far from beingtextually explicit:

" ... it is typically the case that the texts which a reader will normally encounter will show a minimal amount of formal cohesion, assume

massive amounts of existing background knowledge, and normally require the reader to make whatever inferences he feels willing to work for in order to reach an understanding of what is being conveyed."(Brown and Yule, 1983: 269 - 270)

If cohesion is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for coherence it is worth

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asking whether it can be usefully related to the concept of coherence. Hoey (1991:12) who defines coherence as an aspect of the reader's evaluation of a text, suggests that cohesive devices are objective, easily recognisable features of

text which can be assessed in terms of the extent to which they influence the

reader in finding the text coherent. Carstens (1997) adds that cohesion is a

useful aid in the creation of texts. Most texts have a clear cohesive structure and

it is suggested that this can strengthen coherence (Weideman, 1984:73 as cited

in Carstens, 1997:121; cf. 2.2.2 which details the results of empirical studies

relating certain types of cohesion to the coherence of student texts in particular).

Cohesion can also contribute to compactness of a text (Donnelly, 1994: 111 in

Carstens, 1997: 121; Yde and Spoelders, 1985} thereby making it easier to read. The present study followed the tradition of empirical research which has correlated various categories of cohesion with coherence in texts of student academic writing in an effort to establish whether and to what extent specific cohesive relations have an effect on the coherence of these texts. It is hoped by doing this to explicate more precisely the concept of coherence.

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