Coherence relations in discourse and EFL writing

ANNA-MARIA HATZITHEODOROU

Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece

ABSTRACT

Rhetorical Structure Theory (henceforth RST), developed by Mann and Thompson (1988), provides a descriptive framework for discourse analysis that points to and describes the relations between text segments according to their functions. This theory explores coherence relations in a hierarchical fashion, proceeding from the larger to the smaller units in texts. In this paper, we apply the basic tenets of RST to a partial analysis of an argumentative text. Since it claims to provide a framework for comprehensive analyses of texts, RST appears to be suitable for EFL discourse comprehension and production because:

(i) Understanding the relations between segments and also their effects on the reader can help students retrieve intended/authorial and implied meanings, as well as overt or covert ideological complexes. This understanding then becomes particularly useful when students produce argumentative prose.

(ii) This type of analysis can be useful for summarisation purposes as it points to the most essential segments and their interrelations in a text that form its backbone.

While not ignoring RST’s certain limitations (Bateman and Rondhuis 1997), we conclude our paper by exploring the usefulness of RST for EFL teaching methodology in our attempt to sensitise students to text structure.

1. INTRODUCTION

The question of what makes texts hang together or cohere has been tackled by a significant number of researchers. The answer to this question varies according to what factor each researcher considers to be decisive for discourse connectedness. Halliday and Hasan (1976) consider lexicogrammatical resources, such as reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction, and lexical cohesion, the factors that
create texture or cohesion and thus coherence. Brown and Yule (1983) place emphasis on the interpretive abilities of the reader who relies on his/her background knowledge and the situation at hand for his/her interpretation of coherence. What makes a text coherent is for van Dijk (1977) the interaction between micro- and macro-structures, that is the lower and higher levels of discourse, while for Hoey (1996) it is lexical cohesion, created by the repetition of certain lexical items which form links in a text.

2. PRESENTATION OF RST

Within this context, viewing coherence as a function of the relations between segments in a text, Mann and Thompson (1988) have developed Rhetorical Structure Theory (henceforth RST). Since RST claims that coherence is owed to relational structure rather than to explicit lexical or grammatical coherence markers (Mann, Matthiessen and Thompson 1992:46), it can be very useful in the areas of EFL discourse comprehension and production and this is my motivation for focusing on this theory in this paper.

RST provides a descriptive framework for discourse analysis that points to and describes the relations between text segments according to their functions. Coherence relations are explored in a hierarchical fashion, proceeding from the larger to the smaller units in texts. The clause is the minimal unit of analysis. A single rhetorical structure is postulated at the top of the hierarchy of relations (for example, antithesis, solutionhood, motivation) to cover all the units in a text. Two basic elements of RST are the following:

A. **Relations** hold between two non-overlapping text spans, the nucleus and the satellite. In RST there are ‘subject matter’ and ‘presentational’ relations. In the subject matter relation, information is provided to the reader, while in the presentational relation the aim is to increase positive regard for the position presented. For example, solutionhood and evaluation are subject-matter relations (that is they provide information), while antithesis and motivation are presentational; antithesis aims to increase the positive regard of the reader and motivation to increase desire.

B. **Schemas** are defined in terms of relations and determine the co-occurrence of spans of text. The schema application conditions determine the possible RST text structures. The vertical line shows where the span or, in other words, the relation starts and where it ends. The one end of the horizontal line stands for the Nucleus N (the more important part in the relation) and the other end for the Satellite S (the less important part in the relation). The N and the S are connected by the relation, which is manifested by the curve. The direction of the arrow is always towards the N (see figure 1).
3. RST AT WORK

In this section, we will try to apply the RST analysis to an argumentative text written by a professional writer on the problem of education (see Appendix 1).

The main rhetorical structure that covers all the units in this text is solutionhood. A thorough analysis of the relations in the text is given in Appendix 3. Here only a few examples will be presented because of space limitations (see Appendix 1 and 3). The relation that covers all the units in the text is between sentences 1-3 and 4-36. Sentences 1-3 (the Satellites) present the problem (the quality of education is decreasing and there is a plea for an increase in the budget).

1. Just about every month the newspapers run a story which centres on the decreasing quality of education in our schools.
2. The scoop invariably revolves around some young person, usually male, who has managed to complete his schooling without learning to read.
3. Equally invariably, these articles conclude with a tacit plea that we should spend more money on educating the youth.
4. Certainly, I would be the last to argue if the government were to suddenly double spending on education
5. but it is my belief that it is just this kind of crude fixation on the budget, new school facilities and increases in teacher salaries, that has brought about the decline.
6. There are several factors working against education that must be dealt with.

In sentences 4-36 (the rest of the text and the Nuclei in this relation), the author acknowledges the validity of the claim that an increase in the budget is necessary, but points out that more is needed than money, and presents his solution to the problem. The relation of solutionhood as presented in Mann and Thompson (1988) is similar to one of the types of expository texts that Meyer (1975) uses in his/her classification of expository texts. This type is called ‘response-problem and solution’ and usually appears in argumentative essays especially at their beginning, where the author starts by presenting the opposing side and then refutes it by presenting his/her own solution as more viable.
Sentences 1-3 are again the Satellites in the relation of antithesis between 1-3 and 4-6 (the Nuclei). The situations in N (Nucleus) and S (Satellite) are seen to be in contrast, and, by presenting this contrast, the N seems to be more favourable than the S. The Satellite is the Thesis and the Nucleus the Antithesis for which the writer has positive regard. The effect is for the reader to favor the proposition presented in N, that is the author’s opinion on the subject (for an extensive analysis of the relation of Antithesis, see Thompson and Mann 1987).

There is also a relation of elaboration between sentences 1 and 2 and 3. Sentences 2 and 3 are the satellites that serve as examples illustrating the point (the decreasing quality of education) made in sentence 1 (Nucleus).

According to Mann and Thompson (1988:254-55), concession is used when the writer recognises that although the situation in S holds, s/he uses the S to increase the reader’s positive regard for the N. The meaning of the relation of concession, which is evident in the following two sentences, is that although ‘there have been calls for changes,’ the fact that ‘schools reflect all social ills’ is more important.

25. There have been calls for all sort of changes in the schools, the teachers and administrators,
26. but it seems no one wants to deal with the fact that our schools merely reflect the culmination of all the social ills our upper and middle-classes so like to ignore.

Finally, the relation of Joint is worth mentioning. This relation is used when there are no satellites and the propositions presented in the two spans are both nuclear and thus equal. This is why there is no arrow in this schema (see Appendix 3).

33. Parent-teacher associations should be supported and encouraged at all costs,
34. and we should learn from past mistakes

4. ADVANTAGES OF RST
Having outlined how RST works, we will now state the reasons for proposing RST as a useful tool in our attempt to make students sensitive to text structure. More specifically, students can benefit from RST in (a) summary writing, (b) reading comprehension, and (c) comprehension and production of argumentative prose.

Let us first consider the benefits of RST for summary writing. Once we have identified the relations in the text (see section 3), we can delineate the Nuclei. One of the defining characteristics of relations is their asymmetry. There are parts of text that are more central and others that are more peripheral. Those that are central (nuclei) have functional similarities with other nuclei. Segments that belong to the Nucleus Part of the relation are more essential for the text and
since they form the backbone of the text, they need to be included in a summary, while we can delete satellites without thereby significantly affecting the main relations of texts. If we take all the nuclear sentences (the main clauses), we have a synopsis of the text, while grouping the satellite sentences (usually the subordinate clauses) does not produce a text that can stand on its own. Thus, a successful summary would identify and include the Nucleus parts of text.

Most of the nuclear sentences in our example text correspond to the topic sentences (see Appendix 2). In teaching summary writing, instructors often guide their students to look for the topic sentences in every paragraph of the original text. While topic sentences may represent the main ideas, identifying them is not enough. RST takes us a step further in our teaching by helping us identify not only the major ideas in a text, but more importantly the interrelations between ideas.

Another advantage accrued by the adoption of RST in summarising is that it is always important for students to point out the main rhetorical relation of the text. Starting from the top, we can trace the nuclear unit, which usually corresponds to the thesis statement, the reason why the text was written. Thus, we can classify a text as a particular mode of writing and understand its rhetoric. Moreover, finding the relations that connect text spans helps students understand the author’s tone and propositional attitude. An understanding of such issues will surface in students’ lexical choices in the task of summary writing. For example, comprehending that the original text refutes an idea will be reflected in lexical choices that report this refutation. Verbs such as ‘refute’ or ‘disagree’ will in this case render the intentions of the original text.

Reading comprehension can be enhanced within an RST framework as students are aided in understanding the relations between segments, rendering the exact meaning of the original text, and diminishing misunderstandings. Further, students can retrieve intended/authorial and implied meanings, as well as overt or covert ideological complexes.

Deciphering the intended meaning of the author also enhances students’ ability to comprehend and produce argumentative prose. Students are enabled to see that certain relations used by the author aim to increase the effect they have on the reader. Relations that are presentational (that is, they aim to increase the effect they have on the reader) are very common in argumentative writing.

Finally, inability to establish a relation between two segments shows coherence gaps in writing. Making students sensitive to the relations between segments helps them establish coherence in their own writing and produce systematically-written texts. In this sense, students see how a text works and are enabled to decompose it in its parts in a systematic way, rather than being overwhelmed by the text as a whole and also by the intricacies of meaning.
5. DRAWBACKS OF RST

Although RST provides an adequately global text analysis, there are two potential weaknesses associated with it, as noted in Bateman and Rondhuis (1997:22-23):

(a) There may be more than one relation between two events or states. For example, a causal relation may also provide evidence or justification. There may also be disagreement in interpretations. However, in addressing this problem, Mann and Thompson point out that the validity of RST as an analytical tool for discourse analysis does not seem to be threatened by the possibility of multiple interpretations. In fact, Mann and Thompson (1988:265) claim that “the multiplicity of RST analyses is normal, consistent with linguistic experience as a whole, and is one of the kinds of pattern by which the analyses are informative”. Indeed, the degree of flexibility in the analysis of texts (more than one possible interpretation) renders this multiplicity of interpretations enriching rather than restrictive. Moreover, one interpretation does not necessarily exclude others. One of the issues repeatedly stressed in EFL teaching is that several readings of the same text point to richness in language. While we adopt the most prevailing reading, other possible readings need not be dismissed because in this way the ambiguity in language which can be attributed to authorial intentionality becomes evident.

(b) Another potential weakness is which aspects of the meaning of a nucleus or satellite to consider when deciding on a possible application of a relation. According to Bateman and Rondhuis, underspecification is a limitation of RST that can be seen in the following excerpt of a text on the Gulf war that talks about the decision of the members of parliament to vote against the use of force:

1a. But those who rebelled went too far
1b. by voting, in effect, against the use of force.
2. They failed to send the message of full-hearted and united support to our fighting forces, now facing a fearsome task.
3. They failed to send the message to Saddam Hussein that tyrants will be opposed—not appeased. (Bateman and Rondhuis, 1997:28).

In this example, the RST analysis by Mann and Thompson connects sentences 2 and 3 with a joint relation in which the two sentences are seen as equal. Another text analysis, the CR (Conjunctive Relations) analysis developed by Martin and also presented in Bateman and Rhondhuis (1997), considers the relation between 2 and 3 an amplifying relation, as in this case it captures the real intention of the author, which is to show sentence 3 as more important. This intention is achieved by parallelism, a technique that reinforces the rhetorical effect in this text. Even though the RST analysis in this particular example lacks the rhetorical effect created by the author, it is not completely inaccurate. We have to acknowledge the fact that RST, and indeed any other text theory, cannot account for all textual intricacies.
6. CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted an initial partial analysis of an argumentative text. Further research in this direction could deal with how RST works with regard to other types of text and also student-written texts so that the usefulness of RST as an analytical tool for EFL teaching can be confirmed.

We can only tentatively claim here that EFL instructors need to have a fair understanding of how RST works in order to use it as a reference point or a blueprint in teaching discourse comprehension and production. However, as a thorough analysis of a text within RST might be excessive and tedious for students, instructors need to focus mainly on those parts of the analysis that they consider important for EFL purposes. To this end, they could select the most important interrelations of segments and ideas to concentrate on them only.

Since relations are defined according to the propositional patterns in the subject-matter of the text, the purposes of the writer, his/her assumptions about the reader, the organisation and presentation modes s/he chooses to use, RST helps students realise that there is always a purpose in writing. By identifying the goals of writers, students construct meaning in their reading and writing. As a result, the acquisition of these two skills is greatly facilitated.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank my supervisor, Eliza Koutoupi-Kitis, and the members of my Ph.D. committee, Angeliki Athanasiadou-Gerothanasi and Michalis Milapides, for their very helpful suggestions on this paper.

REFERENCES


APPENDIX I

ORIGINAL TEXT

1. Just about every month the newspapers run a story which centres on the decreasing quality of education in our schools.

2. The scoop invariably revolves around some young person, usually male, who has managed to complete his schooling without learning to read.

3. Equally invariably, these articles conclude with a tacit plea that we should spend more money on educating the youth.

4. Certainly, I would be the last to argue if the government were to suddenly double spending on education

5. but it is my belief that it is just this kind of crude fixation on the budget, new school facilities and increases in teacher salaries, that has brought about the decline.

6. There are several factors working against education that must be dealt with before we start throwing money to or at the school system.

7. First and foremost, our educational system depends on parental cooperation.

8. In many of the areas where public education seems to have failed most dismally, you will find that the family unit has also broken down quite dismaly.

9. Disciplining in schools can only go so far for problem students.

10. There must be cooperation from the parents.

11. No teacher can make his or her students do their homework.

12. Here again, there must be cooperation from the parents.

13. As a result, any money given to schools in areas with traditionally poor student performance should, in my opinion, be matched with an equal amount devoted to social services towards strengthening parent-student and parent-teacher ties.

14. Bitter experience has taught us what students in disadvantaged areas do to the new auditorium or the new classrooms or, for that matter, the new teacher.

15. when they are given a new school environment without changing the far more influential environment of their homes.

16. Motivating students to learn spreads into every aspect of life.

17. Too many people have considered schools to be a last bastion in a hostile environment.

18. They argue, for instance, that the war against drugs should begin in schools.

19. True, schools should be a part of the war against drugs, but it should hardly be the start of it.

20. Try convincing a 15-year old that he should be studying history when the 17-year-old dealers are making more money than his 40-year-old History teacher.

21. There have been calls for all sort of changes in the schools, the teachers and administrators,
26. but it seems no one wants to deal with the fact that our schools merely reflect the culmination of all the social ills our upper and middle-classes so like to ignore.

27. Either do as Plato suggests and cart everybody’s children off when they are 6 or 7, take them away from their parents

28. so that their schools become their homes, their teachers their only parents;

29. or come to the realization that

30. though the schools and teachers need improvement,

31. the level of education, particularly for underprivileged children, will not significantly improve

32. until the government makes a serious commitment to change the social circumstances of these children, not just in the classroom, but in their homes and neighbourhoods.

32a. This translates into additional spending, but not,

32b. as has been the case in the past,

32c. into simply throwing money at the schools along with tirades against teachers and administrators alike.

33. Parent-teacher associations should be supported and encouraged at all costs,

34. and we should learn from past mistakes:

35. money spent on schools is money wasted

36. unless it is accompanied with money and efforts towards improving the home life and social environment of students.

APPENDIX 2

NUCLEAR SENTENCES

1. Just about every month the newspapers run a story which centres on the decreasing quality of education in our schools.

4. Certainly, I would be the last to argue if the government were to suddenly double spending on education

5. but it is my belief that it is just this kind of crude fixation on the budget, new school facilities and increases in teacher salaries, that has brought about the decline.

6. There are several factors working against education that must be dealt with

8. First and foremost, our educational system depends on parental cooperation.

13. No teacher can make his or her students do their homework.

15. As a result, any money given to schools in areas with traditionally poor student performance should, in my opinion, be matched with an equal amount devoted to social services towards strengthening parent-student and parent-teacher ties.

23. Try convincing a 15-year old that he should be studying history

26. but it seems no one wants to deal with the fact that our schools merely reflect the culmination of all the social ills our upper and middle-classes so like to ignore

29. or come to the realization that the level of education, particularly for underprivileged children, will not significantly improve

33. Parent-teacher associations should be supported and encouraged at all costs,

34. and we should learn from past mistakes
APPENDIX 3
TEXT ANALYSIS ACCORDING TO RHETORICAL STRUCTURE THEORY (RST)