Argumentative writing: Comprehension and reproduction in foreign language learning

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Abstract

This paper presents a new framework for analysing written summaries of argumentative texts. Extending Sperber and Wilson's (1995) notion of explicated and implicated propositions and Halliday's (1994) metafunctions of language (ideational, interpersonal, and textual), I look at various types of propositional meaning: a. encoded propositional meanings, b. non-encoded, explicated propositional meanings, and c. non-encoded implicated meanings. As authorial attitude can be expressed through a proposition and/or lexical choices, the interpersonal component cuts across the ideational and textual levels. Thus aiding students to retrieve intended/authorial and implied meanings as well as overt or covert ideological text parts will contribute to their overall comprehension of challenging texts.

Key words: summarising, argumentative texts, foreign language teaching, metafunctions of language, explicated and implicated meanings

1. Introduction

Comprehending argumentative writing and retextualising it are two fairly challenging tasks for EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students because of the multifaceted nature of meaning. The efforts of instructors to assist students in these two tasks are equally demanding. As summarising combines comprehen-

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sion and retextualisation, I wish, in this paper, to present a code for analysing and evaluating summaries of argumentative texts at various levels. The focus is on how specific propositions, both textual and sub-textual, of an argumentative text are conceptualised and then reproduced in these summaries.

The data that will be presented were used in an experiment where four groups (two experimental and two control) of Greek university students majoring in English participated. Students were all in their first year and enrolled in a course that focused on the development of reading skills, summarising, and vocabulary building. They had been placed in the specific groups alphabetically when they registered; this placement was kept for the experiment and accounts for the use of letters to identify each group. The experimental groups (A+D) consisted of seventy-three students who received specific instruction in summarising while seventy students comprised the control groups (B+C) that had no instruction. Both groups produced a written summary of an argumentative text after the experimental group had received instruction in summarising.

In the following sections, I will first present the coding scale devised for the analysis of the students’ summaries; I will then look at a specific part of the original text that posed problems for students; and, finally I will use the coding scale to see how propositions of the original text were included in specific samples of students’ summaries.

2. Background of the coding scale

The new framework I propose draws on one part of Sperber and Wilson’s theory of communication and also on Halliday’s metafunctions of language:


   According to Sperber and Wilson, an utterance conveys either explicated meaning (explicitly or overtly communicated) or implicated meaning (implicitly or covertly communicated, having to be inferred).


   A. Ideational: this metafunction refers to representational meaning and relates to the content. The writer has the role of the experiencer and the clause is seen as representation of the external world.

   B. Interpersonal: at this level, the focus is on what the author thinks about the ideas expressed in the text, that is, his/her attitude towards the proposition encoded; in other words, what traditionally has been called propositional attitude meaning. The emphasis is on “the speaker’s own stamp on the situation described” (Halliday and Hasan 1976: 29). The writer
has the role of the intruder and the clause is seen as exchange between speakers/writers and hearers/readers.

C. Textual: this level involves lexical choices that bring about textual organisation. Here we refer to the devices the author uses to provide a unified whole and create cohesion. The clause is regarded as a message.

3. Analysis of the original text

Before discussing the main topic of this paper, which is the new coding scale, let me briefly present the original text on which the students’ summaries were based. The text used for the study, “College Women and Careers” written by Mira Komarovsky, is about the mixed signals society sends to women: although the women’s right to work outside the home is acknowledged, the prevailing belief is that women should stay at home to care for their children. In the introduction, the author refers to a survey she did, according to which women would not give up work for raising children. The text part under consideration appears right after this introduction (in the middle of the text):

1 The conflicts that women express today do not signify a conservative trend.

Quite the contrary, women are making a radical discovery, that their society for all the rhetoric of equality, says to them, in effect, what a male senior at an Ivy League college recently told me: “I would not want to marry a woman whose only goal is to become a housewife. This type of woman would not have enough bounce and zest in her. Moreover, I want an independent girl, one who has her own interests and diversion. However, when we both agree to have children, my wife must be the one to raise them.”

5 He continued, with obvious pride in his egalitarianism.

“I believe that no woman should be barred solely on grounds of sex from the highest offices, that women should have absolutely equal opportunities in business and the professions, but I still insist that a woman who is a mother should devote herself to her children.”

10 Young women are becoming aware that the call to equal opportunities for women outside the home is an empty slogan as long as the society insists on traditional role segregation within the family. Some women react to this discovery with equanimity, others with frustration, resignation, or indignation—making in their personal lives whatever makeshift arrangements they can.

But the real touchstone of their aspirations is the longing for a socie-
ty in which the rhetoric of equality will be realized in fact. There is no
 denying that this would require major institutional changes.

We will focus our analysis only on the italicised parts of the text above although the wider context is also cited. At the ideational level, the author quotes the words of a man (lines 5-9 and 11-14) to highlight the contradiction in society’s beliefs: a woman should have interests and be independent but when it comes to the raising of children, she should be the one responsible. At the interpersonal level, attitude is encoded with: a) the whole quotation, b) the phrase for all the rhetoric of equality (line 4) and c) the choice of words that show moral obligation (should [lines 11, 12, 14], must [line 9], insist [line 13]). More specifically, the phrase for all the rhetoric of equality and in particular the phrase for all with the meaning of despite predispose the reader to expect lack of equality in what will follow. Indeed, this expectation is realised in the sarcastic phrase, “He continued, with obvious pride in his egalitarianism” (line 10). Following Kitis and Milapides (1997: 565) who demonstrate how “a proposition that expresses a value judgement...and usually registers the speaker’s or writer’s attitude towards his/her topic can also pass as an assertion of a factual state”, we can claim that the sarcastic phrase on line 10 does not only encode the author’s attitude but also acts as a factual assertion because a competent reader would realise that the content of the male senior’s quotation and the word egalitarianism are factually incompatible.

Finally, at the textual level, in line with Langleben’s (1983: 72) claim that micro-coherence occurs within text fragments and macro-coherence applies to a whole text, we can point out here that this quotation creates macro-coherence because the man’s words are tied to the thesis of the text further on: Young women are becoming aware that the call to equal opportunities for women outside the home is an empty slogan as long as the society insists on traditional role segregation within the family (lines 15-17).

4. How the new framework works

My aim in this section will be to demonstrate how the two theoretical frameworks by Sperber and Wilson as well as by Halliday can be extended so that they can then be of particular use in scoring summaries of written texts.

Halliday’s framework stresses the social aspect of language and examines how the three metafunctions (ideational, interpersonal, and textual) are encoded in grammar but, while this framework can be used for a textual analysis, it neither provides any tools for measuring comprehension nor does it capture the
several types of meaning. This gap can be filled by Sperber and Wilson’s analysis, which points to different types of meaning and emphasises the cognitive aspect of communication. Thus, a combination of the two approaches could better indicate the multifaceted nature of language. In the new framework, we separate the text into its macro- and micro-coherence (see Figure 1 below).

At the macro-coherence level, we examine what is conveyed. We have three categories related to the ideational metafunction. While Halliday considers the ideational in terms of transitivity and paratactic and hypotactic relations, I look at three categories in terms of the content elements which correspond to various types of meaning: a. encoded propositional meanings, b. non-encoded explicatured propositional meanings, and c. non-encoded implicated meanings:

**CATEGORY 1: PROPOSITIONS—ASSERTIVE MEANINGS.** This category refers to propositional meaning that is encoded in the text. For example (all the examples are from the original text we looked at in section 3):

*I would not want to marry a woman whose only goal is to become a housewife*

By explicitly making this assertion, we expect the reader to comprehend our proposition in a straightforward manner. Assertive meanings fall normally under this category.

**CATEGORY 2: EXPLICATURE—CULTURAL MEANINGS.** At this level, we have enriched propositional meaning that is non-encoded but explicatured. Further, it is not necessarily intended by the speaker and is broadly assumed by speakers of the community. For example:

*This type of woman [the housewife] would not have enough bounce and zest in her*

This proposition has to be enriched in order to be comprehended. To comprehend what the speaker means by “bounce and zest”, we can resort to the cultural belief that these two traits characterise a working woman and not a housewife. This sentence refers to cultural knowledge that people in the community usually have.¹

**CATEGORY 3: IMPLICATURE—INFERRED MEANINGS.** In this case, meaning is non-propositional, non-encoded, and implicated. Since the implicature is always intended by the speaker and not lexicalised, the reader has to go beyond the propositional meaning and understand the inferences. It follows therefore that this category happens to be the most challenging of all. Irony and, in general, figurative language can be part of this category. For example:

¹ I should point out here that I do not endorse the view presented in the sentence. A widespread belief does not entail that what it describes is necessarily true. Indeed, there are housewives who have “more bounce and zest” than working women. Thus, we see that this is a clear case of a stereotype.
He continued, with obvious pride in his egalitarianism [meaning the opposite]

Sperber and Wilson (1995: 239) claim that irony expresses attitude of the disapproving type as a speaker or writer believes the exact opposite of the opinion echoed. In our example sentence, Komarovsky (the author of the text) is far from believing that what this man and society in general say shows egalitarianism. The particular author’s sarcasm towards the person she refers to can be evident to a competent speaker of the language.

If we talk in terms of the categories of our diagram (see figure 1), the propositional meaning (category 1) would be that the quotation indeed shows egalitarianism. At first glance, this is the proposition we understand from the text. To get to the intended meaning (category 3), however, we need to take into consideration the implication behind the propositional meaning that can be tied to the author’s attitude. The outcome of this endeavour will then be our interpretation of the author’s intention, i.e., what each one of us thinks the author means. Students who only reported the contradiction in the man’s words without showing it as such stayed at category 1 and did not move on to category 3 to capture the real essence of the original text.

CATEGORY 4: ATTITUDE. It is the category that refers to the general stance of the author, a stance that determines the organisation of the whole text. Boundaries between categories 3 and 4 are fuzzy.

Halliday and also all the researchers who have used his framework present the three metafunctions as having the same importance, whereas I would assign more weight to the interpersonal one. Undeniably, all levels are present in a sentence and have to be properly inscribed there, but I would propose a hierarchy of levels, with the interpersonal one being pervasive and influencing the other two levels; the attitude of the author or, in other words, his/her purpose in writing will affect and can be expressed through: a) the information s/he chooses to present (ideational level of propositions) and b) the way this information will be structured (textual level of lexical choices). For this reason, the interpersonal component cuts across the ideational and textual levels as we see in the diagram in figure 1 below. As I have argued elsewhere (Hatzitheodorou 2000: 66), nothing is neutral or objective and even the choice of a seemingly uncoloured term would point to an attitude (cf. Fairclough 1995).

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2 Pertinent here is the distinction Iser (1989: 1219) makes between the artistic (the text created by the author) and the esthetic [writer’s spelling] (the realisation accomplished by the reader) in the reading of a literary text. Although Iser refers to the reading of literary texts, I believe that the aforementioned distinction could also easily apply to the reading of argumentative texts, as in the case of my study.
In terms of the Hallidayan metafunctions, we can say that the ideational metafunction of language (what the text is about) spreads roughly over categories 1 and 2, while the interpersonal (what the author thinks about the ideas expressed in the text) spreads over categories 3 and 4.

**Category 5: Textual Organisation.** At the micro-coherence level we refer to the lexical and syntactic choices that are responsible for text organisation. Although Halliday examines the textual level mainly looking at the progression of theme and rheme in a text, I choose to extend the Hallidayan theme-rheme description as a manifestation of how the textual aspect functions; my objective is to subsume under this category all the exponents the author uses to provide cohesion, and thus coherence, as well as all the coherence relations s/he establishes.

Figure 1, below, summarises the preceding discussion and demonstrates how the three Hallidayan metafunctions can be enriched with Sperber and Wilson's theory of explicated and implicated propositions and how all the levels are interrelated into a new whole:

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MACRO-COHERENCE
  INTERPERSONAL (Attitude)
    Category 4

  IDEATIONAL (Content)
    Types of meaning
      Assertive meaning
        Category 1
          Encoded
          Propositional
          Meaning

      Cultural meaning
        Category 2
          Non-encoded
          Enriched
          Propositional
          Meaning
          Explicated

      Inferred meaning
        Category 3
          Non-encoded
          Non-propositional
          Meaning
          Implicated

    Lexis

Figure 1. The new coding scale.
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5. Analysing students’ texts using the coding scale

5.1 General comments

The text part we analysed in section 3 was conceptualised by students and put in the summaries in the three following ways:

1. The first possibility is that the student accurately points out not only the propositional meaning but also the attitude behind the author’s words and shows the contradiction inherent in the male senior’s quotation (both category 1 and 3). This is the best-case scenario.

2. Another possibility is that the student stays at category 1 (the propositional level) and reports on the contradiction, but s/he neither moves forward to category 4, which is responsible for the attitude, nor does s/he indicate the authorial intention.

3. The final possibility refers to the student’s failure at all levels (ideational, interpersonal, and textual) by distorting the original’s idea (failure at all categories). This is the worst-case scenario. Under this category, we can subsume summaries in which the original text’s attitude was encoded but the textual level was so inaccurate that it influenced negatively the other two levels.

As we can see in the table below, the percentage for case 1 (success in all three levels by pointing the attitude of the original text in a proper way) was 67.12% for the experimental groups while the control groups got 38.57%. For case 2 (the one where there is reference to the original’s idea but not to the author’s attitude) the percentages were 16.44% for the experimental groups and 30% for the control groups. Finally, 16.44% of the experimental groups and 31.43% of the control groups were included in the third case (where there is failure at all levels).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Groups</th>
<th>Case1</th>
<th>Case2</th>
<th>Case3</th>
<th>Sum</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Experimental</strong></td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class A</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class D</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sum A+D</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Classes A+D</td>
<td>67.12%</td>
<td>16.44%</td>
<td>16.44%</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Control</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Class B</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class C</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sum B+C</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Classes B+C</td>
<td>38.57%</td>
<td>30.00%</td>
<td>31.43%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Generally speaking, the difference between the two groups was that the experimental groups, because they received instruction, were better in presenting ideas, paraphrased more, and combined sentences with connectives to a greater extent than the control groups, which relied heavily on the wording and the word order of the original. We see the distribution of the four groups in relation to each one of the three cases in Figure 2:

![Figure 2. Comparison between the experimental groups (A+D) and the control groups (B+C)](image)

5.2 Specific examples from students’ summaries

Let me now apply the coding scale to specific students’ texts to see how we can code the texts according to the scale.

5.2.1 Possibility 1: An accurate transformation of the original text at all levels (ideational, interpersonal, textual)

Summary 1

1 M. Komarovsky believes that there is not true equality of the sexes, because although society supports the idea that women should have the same opportunities as men when it comes to children, they expect the wife to be the one to raise them. So there are a lot of changes to be done for this equality to become a reality.

5 With this complex sentence (lines 1-4), the student very skillfully and concisely reproduces the original text both at the level of propositions (category 1) and also that of implicature (category 3). The student succeeds at the ideational level because:
A. With the proposition because the wife should raise the children there is not true equality, she summarises the point made by the original (compare the analysis of it in section 3) and establishes the relation of cause and effect.

B. This cause and effect relation is complemented by a concessive clause to show society’s and men’s contradiction: “although society supports the idea that women should have the same opportunities as men when it comes to children, they expect the wife to be the one to raise them” (lines 2-4).

At the interpersonal level, the stance of the author is pointed out by the use of M. Komarovsky as the person who argues against the lack of true equality: “M. Komarovsky believes that there is not true equality of the sexes” (line 1). Here propositional meaning is under the scope of the propositional attitude verb believe. At the textual level, the student very skillfully uses the connectives because and although to highlight main and subordinate propositions.

Summary 2

However, they [women] realise that all the rhetoric of equality is an empty promise as long as society insists on the women’s traditional role as a housewife. Many men want an independent woman and not just a housewife but when it comes to the children they believe that the wife must raise them.

Women are looking forward to a society in which equality will be a reality.

This student does not point out explicitly the author’s opinion, i.e., she does not mention how the author is positioned towards the male senior, but she shows the author’s attitude with propositional meaning. The attitude is encoded in her lexical choices. When she writes many men (line 3), she refers to a generalised belief, thus showing attitude. With the verb believe (line 4) she shows the propositional attitude. Although ostensibly she just shows propositional meaning, she encodes the original’s attitude with the lexis she uses. Still, this summary lacks the quality of summary 1 as most information is given in main clauses that do not present relations of propositions as concisely as summary 1 does.

5.2.2 Possibility 2: Reporting the contradiction but not the original text’s attitude

Summary 3

According to a man’s opinion, who expressed his view on the matter, women should be equal to men as far as career is concerned, but from the moment that they make children, they must be devoted to them. Women aspire that their society someday will be able to overcome this traditional trend and it will be prepared to accept all the new rules that other countries have already put on.
Contrary to summary 2, which encodes the original’s attitude, this summary misses the author’s sarcasm because, by using the specific a man (line 1), the student fails to generalise and thus show attitude. This should be considered a very important omission and efforts should be made in teaching summarising to avoid it; the attitude an author encodes in his/her text is indispensable and for this reason it has to be transferred in the summary.

5.2.3 Possibility 3: Failing at all levels (ideational, interpersonal, textual)

Summary 4

On the contrary, more and more women answered that they would just stop to deliver or that they would work less hours. Obviously, women want to have their own interests as well as the responsibility to raise their children. And men actually prefer this type of woman. Both sides seem to adopt and realise the idea of equanimity.

In this summary the quotation of the male senior is completely distorted as it is not women who want to have their own interests as well as the responsibility to raise their children (lines 2-3), but men who want women to do both things (compare the analysis of the original text in section 3). This is a failure at the level of propositions (the ideational level, category 1) as the student presents the exact opposite of the original text. As far as category 4 is concerned (the interpersonal level), she misses the implication that the society’s belief about women’s role is contradictory and instead inserts a personal comment when she writes that both sides seem to adopt and realise the idea of equanimity (lines 4-5). At the textual level, the student misunderstands equanimity for equality.

6. Discussion

This paper presented a new coding scale for evaluating written summaries of texts. The advantage of such a scale is that it attempts to encompass and stress the various facets of meaning that have to be considered. The diagram in figure 1 above (section 4) demonstrates that it is not enough to stitch together in a summary sentences from the original text without taking care of propositional, explicated or implicated meanings. It also stresses the importance of the tone of the original by emphasising the vital role of the interpersonal level as there is always attitude in everything we say, especially in argumentative texts. This level involves implied meanings without which comprehension of a text is not complete.

Moreover, we realise that there are numerous ways at the textual level to present information both at the level of propositions and at the level of impli-
catures, according to the effect we want our texts to have. In the case of the text under consideration in this paper, the attitude of the original could be either encoded with the use of certain words (for example, several students in the study characterised the idea that there is supposedly true equality between sexes as “contradiction”, “myth”, “utopia” or by generalising and showing the idea coming out of the mouth of many men and thus pointing out this belief as belonging to the society in general (example of summary 2, section 5.2.1). Making students aware of the options available to them to encode propositions and attitude prevents them from using ready-made and unimaginative expressions.

Finally, since the diagram clearly presents the various levels of meaning and their interrelations, it enables us to see at what level a particular sentence is problematic. A common practice in foreign language teaching is that instructors’ feedback on students’ written texts is reduced to general comments about their papers’ “lack of quality”, comments that students often do not understand (Leki 1990: 61). The new coding scale addresses exactly this problem. It demonstrates whether the weakness is located at the level of propositions, the level of attitude, or the level of lexis because a summary may be successful at the level of propositions but inaccurate interpersonally and textually. In this sense, the fine differences among levels are not subsumed in generalised comments about lack of quality but easily emerge in specific comments that identify weak areas.

Our aim in teaching comprehension and reproduction of written discourse should be to embrace intended/authorial and implied meanings as well as overt or covert ideological text parts in especially challenging texts.

References


