A SEMANTIC COHERENCE ANALYSIS OF A SHORT STORY

Saleh Ramadan, Assist. Prof., PhD, Al-Zaytoonah Private University of Jordan

Abstract: To my knowledge , there has not been any research involving the analysis of coherence of an English discourse by Arabs in the Arab World. This study analyzes some conditions which make "the Story of an Hour" coherent. Following Van Dijk (1977) , the researcher attempted to find out how individual identity, whole-part , inclusion, membership , frame , senses relations ,etc . make this story coherent .Just for facilitating the process of analysis , each line in the story is numbered . The analysis has shown that this story is coherent according to these conditions . It is also hoped that the study may contribute to the basics of teaching , teaching materials and producing and understanding coherent discourses

Keywords : Coherence , Inclusion , Frame , Sense Relations , The Story of an Hour.

Van Dijk (1977) defines coherence as a semantic property of discourses, based on the interpretation of each individual sentence relative to the interpretation of other sentences . He states that sentences or propositions in a discourse may form a coherent discourse, however, even if they are not all connected to every other sentence or proposition

Brown and Yule (1983) define a coherent text as one having the elements of the message to be connected with or without overt linguistic connections between those elements. They also quote Labov (1970) who states that coherence or incoherence is not based on a relationship between utterances , but between the actions performed with those utterances. The following two examples are coherent although there are no formal linguistic links connecting contiguous linguistic strings .

1. Find the Ball . Win a House.
2. Ali was ill . He didn't go to school.

Despite the imperative form in number 1 , the required interpretation of the first sentence involves the first as a condition for the second . But in number 2 , despite the declarative form , the required interpretation of the first sentence involves the first as a reason for the second .

Beaugrande and Dressler (1981) assert that a text is coherent if the concepts and "relations" which underlie the surface text are mutually accessible and relevant . A concept is a configuration of knowledge (cognitive content) which can be recovered or activated with more or less unity and consistency in the mind. Relations are links between concepts which appear together in a textual world . In supplying these relations, people draw upon their stored knowledge of the world . A text which makes sense is one where there is continuity of sense among the knowledge activated by the expressions of the text . The continuity of senses is the foundation of coherence .

Coherence begins in the mind of the writer (Morgan + Sellner ,1980) , is transferred to the text (Halliday and Hasan , 1976) , and finally occurs in the mind of the reader (Carrel ,1982) . Coherence is a global feature of discourse (Mandl , Stain , &Trabasso ,1984) .

Coherence is related to the principle of organization postulated to account for the underlying functional connectedness or identity of a piece of spoken or written language (text , discourse) (Crystal , 1991 , p.60) . In other words , coherence refers to connectivity in term of content and organization .

McCarthy (1991) states that making sense of a text is an act of interpretation that depends as much as on what we as readers bring to a text as what the

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author puts into it . He emphasizes the role of the reader in actively building the world of a text based on his/her experience of the world and how states and events are characteristically manifested in it . The reader has to activate such knowledge, make inference and constantly assess his/her interpretation in the light of situation and the aims and goals of the text as the reader perceives them.

In the following section , a short story called "The Story of an Hour" by Kate Chopin (1894) has been chosen to be the subject of this study . The researcher is going to analyze some conditions which make this story coherent . For the sake of facilitating analysis only , each line in the story is numbered as shown in the appendix .

A Semantic Coherence Analysis of the Story

In the first twelve lines of this story , it seems that the **Individual Identity** is the first determinant in the model sequence . V(Mrs. Mallard) = (she) . The other individuals , viz V(death) ,V(disaster), V(the list of killed) , V (Josephine) , V(Richard) are related in a less direct way . The relations involved are those of **inclusion , membership and part-whole** . *Death, disaster, the list of killed , message , storm* , and *truth* may be included in the individual ,***story*** , the most general term, similarly, Josephine , Mrs. Mallard and Mr. Mallard may be members of the same family , while Richard be a member of friends related to that family . In the first line, heart is part of Mrs. Mallard's body ,similarly , room (line 11) is part of her house where she received the news of her husband's death .

The individuals seem to cluster around two concepts , viz the wife and the husband's death . The individuals related by *identity* or *partiality* through successive models will be called a series . In most sentences , these two series are related by predicates , eg by verbs. The predicates in these successive sentences are related to each other because they denote a possible sequence of activities , bodily states , and mental (emotional) states for the sick wife series and related properties of her husband's death series . These twelve lines are also coherent due to *time/ period* and *place identity* which are associated with the activity sequence and the husband's death series . To understand this , further explication is necessary . All predicates are identical by past tense and also identical by place , *her house* where those sequences of activities , bodily , mental (emotional) states happened .

The second determinant in making such a story coherent is the **Assumed Normality of the World** involved . That is our expectation about the semantic structures of this discourse are determined by our knowledge about the structures of worlds in general and of particular states or affairs or courses of events .

According to this normality condition , the following alternative for the main clause in the first sentence(lines 1-2) is not acceptable .

(……) no care was taken to break to her the news of her husband's death .

As such , this main clause could occur in discourses in which such a state or event is made plausible . Normality , therefore , is a relative concept . The set of propositions characterizing our conventional knowledge of a situation (activity , courses of events ,states) is called **a Frame** . In the above example , we have a husband's death frame , viz a set of typical death individuals and typical activities concerning husband's death . For this reason ,the alternative above in this respect conflicts with a husband's death frame . Also , such a frame includes propositions determining the possible ordering of facts , e.g along the causal- consequence and general –particular or whole-part lines .

The previous topic in which Mrs. Mallard is in her room (line 11) , is being picked up again by the phrase *there stood* (line 13) . The adverb *there* in that case refers to her room where she was alone . The predicate facing the open window (line 13) is related to the predicates being *in* her room (line 11) , and sinking and pressing down (lines 13-14) .

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The new topic sentence : She could see …… (line 16) is less obviously coherent. The individuals introduced in the subsequent sentences , viz *trees , rain , peddler , sky , clouds ,sparrows , song* (lines 16-19) do not belong to the wife or to the husband's series or frames. None of the individuals introduced before reappear in the models for these sentences . Therefore , these passages (lines 16-21) would be incoherent with the previous passages (lines1-15). We have an example of **a change in the topic of discourse** . Now , the question is whether this change is acceptable or not . In other words , whether the new topic of discourse can be reached from the previous one .

The link connecting the two topics is expressed by the clause she could see…(line 16) , which entails that she sees something outside . The implied introduction of the notion seeing in the open square allows introduction of the atmosphere-biosphere frame . The access to the new topic , established in a locally different world , is provided by **seeing relation** , whereas it is understood in such a case that some individuals in that world are objects of the seeing relation . Also hearing and feeling relations implied play a role in making the new topic coherent and a few other individuals are the objects of hearing and feeling relations implied .

The sentence (lines 22-24) is related to the previous passages by introducing *cushion , chair* which are parts of her room where she sat(line 11) . It is also related to the sentence: Into this she sank… (lines 13-15) by being tired property .

The subsequent sentences (propositions) (lines 25-31) , therefore , are to be satisfied in models with world accessible by **seeing , thinking , feeling and hearing relations** . Indeed , the individuals (*sky , patches , air , sounds , scents , color* ,et) belong to the actual atmosphere / biosphere series) .No new individuals are introduced in these subsequent models . Thus recall worlds are coherently introduced because they are related to the present actual world of the agent .

The subsequent sentences (lines 32-38) are related to the previous sequences by **recognizing relation** . The words *free , free , free* are included in the individual, *thing* ,she saw previously through her open square .

The topic of freedom is introduced . Terror going from her eyes , staying keen and bright , pulses beating fast, the course of warming blood, relaxation , living for herself , possession of coming years , welcoming those years , no imposing will , brief moment of illumination ,self-assertion and strongest impulse of her being are propositions characterizing the freedom world of the wife frame(lines 32-53) .

In (lines 54-56) Josephine introduced at the beginning of the story reappears again here . Since she is the closest member in the family , *a sister* , her role here is to console her sister , Louise (Mrs. Mallard) and ease her . Louise (Mrs. Mallard)still lives in the freedom world .

In (lines 57-70) , leaving her room and with her sister going down are still coherent with the previous propositions by **feeling relations** . Feeling and living in freedom exist by introducing individuals , viz *triumph , victory* which are relevant to freedom series introduced in the previous sentences . Richard , introduced at the beginning of the story reappears here again .

In (lines 66-70) the introduction of a new topic comes as a surprise by the action of opening the front door . Mr. Mallard , introduced as dead at beginning of the story reappears here as alive .

Josephine and Richard also appear in these lines . By normality condition , all of them were amazed particularly Mrs. Mallard (Louise) who fainted . Doctors were called for help . they said that heart disease , introduced at the beginning of the story , was the cause of her death (line 71).

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By activating the **inference process** , the joy of freedom which she lived ended after seeing her husband alive and that is the reason for her death .

Therefore , (line 71) is coherent with the previous lines (66-70).

Conclusion

We can say that the conditions which make this story coherent are :

1 .Each situation of each model for this story is either identical with an actual situation or accessible from this situation .

2 .The valuation functions of Mrs. Mallard (Louise) are related to the valuation functions of the individuals of the atmosphere / biosphere- series by **the seeing , hearing and feeling relations .**

3.The valuation functions of Mrs. Mallard (Louise) are related to the valuation functions of the individuals of the freedom series by **the feeling** and **thinking relations** .

4.Many individuals are defined by relations of partiality (**inclusion, part - whole , membership**)

Examples : a - *accident , disaster , storm and message* may be Included in the most general individual ,***story*** .

b-*Head , eyes ,hands* and *blood* are parts of a body.

c-*Mrs. Mallard (louise) and Josephine* are members of a family .

5. Human working activities are composed of components such as , she **wept** , she **went** , (she) **stood** , whereas **sad ,veiled , killed** are members of death condition dimension .

6.**The Assumed Normality of the Worlds** , (lines 1-2) reveals that it is a normal condition that her sister Josephine who told her sister the news of her husband's death in broken sentences , veiled hints that revealed in half – concealing .

7.**Frame** : to prevent any exception to **the normality of the world** , *a frame* is introduced..Such a frame includes propositions determining the possible ordering of facts , eg. Along the cause / consequence and general – particular or whole – part lines .

(…….) no care was taken to tell her sister the news of her husband's death .

According to death frame of this situation , this alternative is not acceptable (lines 1-2).

8.**The Approximation of the Condition of Coherent Topic Change** . This means that a sequence of sentences consisting of two coherent sequences is coherent if there is a relation such that individuals or properties of the two topics or frames satisfy this relation in this story , or if the first sequence contains a predicate giving possible access to the possible worlds in which the second sequence is satisfied.

Examples :

She wept at once , with sudden , wild abandonment , in her sister arms (lines 10-11).She sat with her head thrown back upon the cushion of the chair , quite motionless , except when a sob came up into her throat and shook her , as a child who has cried itself to sleep continues to sob in its dreams (lines 22-24). She knew that she would weep again when she saw the kind tender hands folded in death : the face that had never looked save with love upon her , fixed and gray and dead (line40 -42) . And yet she had loved him sometimes . Often she had not (line 50) . It was only yesterday she had thought with a shudder that life might be belong (line 61) .

These sentences (propositions) existing in different topics are coherent by the approximation of the condition of coherent topic change . Therefore , the sequences of the sentences consisting of these coherent sequences are coherent .

9.**Repetition**: repeating the same individuals .

Examples : days (lines 59,60)

Open window (lines 13,58)

10.The **permanence** of the individuals during the story .

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Examples : Mrs. Mallard = she = Louise

Josephine appears at the beginning ,in the middle and at the end of the story .

11.**Inference** as filling in gaps or discontinuities in interpretation . Inferences are connections people make when attempting to reach an interpretation of what they read or hear .

Examples : the joy that kills , (the last line) .

The researcher hopes that this analysis may contribute to the basics of teaching and teaching materials which may help in producing and understanding coherent discourses. The designers of the syllabus should focus on sense relations between lexical items , such as synonymy , hyponymy , meronomy ,antonymy , inclusion , possessions as well as other terms , such as inference , entailment , , predicate , referring expressions ,etc. since each of them plays an important role in making a text coherent. The teachers should also be interested in how to teach each of them effectively in order to make a message coherent. For example , Some inferences create coherence, and to illustrate this , I state the following example:

1 . I went shopping yesterday.

2 . The climb did me good.

To understand this passage, it is necessary to infer that *the climb* of the second sentence was part of *the shopping trip* of the first

Another example on hyponymy and entailment can be seen as follows:

A . Saleh is from Amman.

B . Saleh is from Jordan.

Sentence A entails Sentence B according to the following basic rule of sense inclusion :

Given two sentences A and B , identical in every way except that A contains a word X where B contains a different word Y , and X is a hyponym of Y , then sentence A entails sentence B.

In short , each term above should be presented in a syllabus in a good way and taught successfully showing the role of each in creating and understanding coherent texts.

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Appendix
“ The Story of an Hour” by Kate Chopin (1894)

1 Knowing that Mrs. Mallard was afflicted with a heart trouble, great care was taken to 2.break to her as gently as possible the news of her husband’s death.

3.It was her sister Josephine who told her, in broken sentences; veiled hints that revealed in 4.half concealing. Her husband’s friend Richards was there, too, near her. It was he who had 5.been in the newspaper office when intelligence of the railroad disaster was received, with 6.Brently Mallard’s name leading the list of "killed". He had only taken the time to assure 7.himself of its truth by a second telegram, and had hastened to forestall any less careful, 8.less tender friend in bearing the sad message.

9.She did not hear the story as many women have heard the same, with a paralyzed inability 10.to accept its significance. She wept at once, with sudden, wild abandonment, in her 11.sister’s arms. When the storm of grief had spent itself she went away to her room alone. 12.She would have no one follow her.

13.There stood, facing the open window, a comfortable, roomy armchair. Into this she sank, 14.pressed down by a physical exhaustion that hunted her body and seemed to reach into 15.her soul.

16.She could see in the open square before her house the tops of trees that were all aquiver 17.with the new spring life. The delicious breath of rain was in the air. In the street below a 18.peddler was crying his wares. The notes of a distant song which someone was singing 19.reached her faintly, and countless sparrows were twittering in the eaves.

20.There were patches of blue sky showing here and there through the clouds that had met 21.and piled one above the other in the west facing her window.

22.She sat with her head thrown back upon the cushion of the chair, quite motionless, 23.except when a sob came up into her throat and shook her, as a child who has cried itself 24.to sleep continues to sob in its dreams.

25.She was young, with a fair, calm face, whose lines bespoke repression and even a certain 26.strength. But now there was a dull stare in her eyes, whose gaze was fixed away off 27.yonder on one of those patches of blue sky. It was not a glance of reflection, but rather 28.indicated a suspension of intelligent thought.

29.There was something coming to her and she was waiting for it, fearfully. What was it? She 30.did not know; it was too subtle and elusive to name. But she felt it, creeping out of the 31.sky, reaching toward her through the sounds, the scents, the color that filled the air.

32.Now her bosom rose and fell tumultuously. She was beginning to recognize this thing that 33.was approaching to possess her, and she was striving to beat it back with her will – as 34.powerless as her two white slender hands would have been. When she abandoned 35.herself a little whispered word escaped her slightly parted lips. She said it over and over 36.under the breath: "free, free, free!" The vacant stare and the look of terror that had 37.followed it went from her eyes. They stayed keen and bright. Her pulses beat fast, and 38.the coursing blood warmed and relaxed every inch of her body.

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39.She did not stop to ask if it were or were not a monstrous joy that held her. A clear and 40.exalted perception enabled her to dismiss the suggestion as trivial. She knew that she 41.would weep again when she saw the kind, tender hands folded in death; the face that 42.had never looked save with love upon her, fixed and gray and dead. But she saw beyond 43.that bitter moment a long procession of years to come that would belong to her 44.absolutely. And she opened and spread her arms out to them in welcome.

45.There would be no one to live for during those coming years; she would live for herself. 46.There would be no powerful will bending hers in that blind persistence with which men 47.and women believe they have a right to impose a private will upon a fellow-creature. A 48.kind intention or a cruel intention made the act seem no less a crime as she looked upon 49.it in that brief moment of illumination.

50.And yet she had loved him –sometimes. Often she had not. What did it matter! What 51.could love, the unsolved mystery, count for in the face of this possession of self-assertion 52.which she suddenly recognized as the strongest impulse of her being!

53."free! Body and soul free!" she kept whispering.

54.Josephine was kneeling before the closed door with her lips to the key hold, imploring 55.for admission. "Louise, open the door! I beg; open the door -- you will make yourself ill. 56.What are you doing, Louise? For heaven's sake open the door."

57"Go away. I am not making myself ill." No; she was drinking in a very elixir of life through 58.that open window.

59.Her fancy was running riot along those days ahead of her. Spring days, and summer days, 60.and all sorts of days that would be her own. She breathed a quick prayer that life might 61.be long. It was only yesterday she had thought with a shudder that life might be long.

62.She arose at length and opened the door to her sister's importunities. There was a feverish 63.triumph in her eyes, and she carried herself unwittingly like a goddess of Victory. She 64.clasped her sister's waist. And together they descended the stairs. Richards stood waiting 65.for them at the bottom.

66.Some one was opening the front door with a latchkey. It was Brently Mallard who entered, 67.a little travel-stained, composedly carrying his grip-sack and umbrella. He had been far 68.from the scene of the accident, and did not even know there had been one. He stood 69.amazed at Josephine's piercing cry; at Richards quick motion to screen him from the view 70.of his wife.

71.When the doctors came they said she had died of heart disease--of the joy that kills.

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