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HOW DOES ARGUMENTATIVE STRUCTURE PLAY OUT WHEN COMMENTING ON A THEORETICAL TEXT IN ONE'S SECOND LANGUAGE?

MARIE J. MYERS

Description of the study

In this qualitative case study we analysed students' argumentative discourse in e-mail discussions on assigned theoretical readings in a training course for teachers of French as a second language. These readings were assigned weekly and served as the basis for the next in-class discussion. The contents of the e-mails were used to identify the major questions that required follow-up in class. In analysing the e-mails we used two measures: first, we looked for emerging categories and second, we used a complexity scale to look for 'complexification' in language use. The assigned readings were varied but were all in French. The level of difficulty the readings entailed could be classified as advanced. The reaction papers were not part of assignments to be graded but rather only formative in nature and a way to identify what had not been understood and in need of further clarification (Lave & Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998; Gee 1999; Wertsch 1991). Students were required to forward their e-mails on a weekly basis using their anonymous e-mail code. We analysed the e-mail reactions over five consecutive weeks. The object of the study was to examine argumentative discourse in reaction papers on theoretical texts (Laing, Phillipson & Lee 1966).

Since these assigned reaction-papers were expected to be written in French, the students' second language we also examined the characteristics of ability to use the second language in argumentative discourse (Kern 1994). The objective of this study using dialogue analysis was two-fold: one, to find emerging categories and then we classified the various utterances in order to uncover intention, ability to express opinion, logic, causality, objectivity, information content, disengagement or inertia in meaning transfer and contestation, so as to identify communicative ability at an advanced level and to channel it in an opportune way for the benefit of future teaching practice (Verity 2000; Swaffar 1988; Myers 2004); second, to understand the level of complexity at which these future teachers of French could function in the French Language, their L2, and uncover weaknesses in order to develop remedial strategies for the future (Johnson 1982).

Theoretical background

Sperber & Wilson (1989) divide verbal communication into two communication processes, one based on coding and decoding, and the other one having to do with ostentation and inference. What is coded is of course of a linguistic nature but also corresponds to an intention. Relating to the former there are acoustic signals being used for semantic representations. Regarding the latter Foppa (1984) claims that every utterance is formulated by someone with an intention. The researcher thinks that when we start expressing ourselves we pretty well know what we intend to say although our intention may not be very clear in our minds. It appears that we do have to formulate our utterances in order for us to be able to verify if what we say corresponds to what we intended to say, and if need be we back-track and correct ourselves. Levelt (1989) also agrees that there is an intention underlying every articulation. So as intention and language use go hand in hand it is quite appropriate to study the language used by these teachers in training so as to establish their level of functioning in language and meaning-making (Auerbach 1992) and to assess the development of their professional thinking (Harré & Gillett 1984).

Participants

We used purposive sampling for the selection of papers from the participants who were part of the course. All the papers were from a fifth year university course with 24 students starting in September 2007. After the course ended, regularly assigned course reaction papers from a five week duration were chosen for analysis. Papers ranged from one to two pages in length. The selection was made based on the fact that these papers were anonymous, sent by e-mail and could not be traced to the author. Each page was assigned a number, so two consecutive page numbers could be part of the same paper. In fact from more than 150 pages, only 50 could be retained for analysis to protect anonymity.

Data analysis

We used two measures to look at argumentative structure.

First, we analysed the transfer of lexical meaning from the 46 French texts of students' reactions into reaction in inter-linguistic and inter-cultural transposition. More specifically we looked at the relations between the utterances, in terms of intention based on the understanding achieved of complex texts, and the ability of enunciators to convey their reaction in argumentative discourse by linguistic means. Logic, causality, objectivity and informational content are factors taken into account. The pages were given numbers from 1 to 50 with some having more than one page. Within each paper each line where an item or unit of meaning appeared was numbered as well. So for instance P 18-20 refers to paper 18 and to the unit of meaning on line 20 in that paper.

The texts were colour coded for each emerging category. The categories were entered onto a chart, with each uncovered item transcribed and referenced under the appropriate item heading.

Second, Duran & Ramaut's (2006) framework originally intended for setting-up tasks in a sequenced order of difficulty was adapted and made to fit the context of our study and our situation in order to use it for the analysis of results.

We understand that this framework, intended for the measurement of processing ability for the receptive skill of reading will certainly represent a greater challenge where the measurement of language production is concerned, namely in our case, critical reaction texts. The authors think nevertheless that the complexity scale also works for production-based tasks. They state that at basic proficiency levels, fluency and complexity prevail over accuracy. So, as far as language output is concerned, getting across the message was considered more essential than spelling accurately or having perfect grammar, this category fitted within our study.

The complexity scale was taken into account when looking at the data and relevant numbers of examples identified under each category as each emerged in the findings. These are reported below.

Results

We found that the students agreed overall with the theoretical underpinnings presented in the different assigned weekly readings in the textbook. One problem that surfaced was disengagement in a very small number of texts while in others, but only for 6% of the text items, we identified contestation, questioning and even rejection of the statements made in the readings.

A. Findings related to the first dialogue analysis measure that was applied.

The analysis uncovered the emergent main categories listed below:

- Intention based on understanding achieved
- Ability to convey reaction to argumentative discourse by linguistic means
- Logic
- Causality
- Objectivity
- Informational content.

Other smaller categories were uncovered, namely:

- Disengagement
- Contestation and rejection.

The question was whether or not the students were impeded in their argumentation because of the request to use their second language in the critical response. There were two such cases, where at times responses to the French text were in English and frustration was evi-

dent. The question is whether these students clearly understood the argumentation in the theoretical text in French, their second language; or whether other constraints were placed on them by their lack of practice in using argumentative discourse in general. Another argument could be made around the more strenuous effort entailed in summarizing and critiquing in another language, in which one may not be as used to the economy of words expected, although one might be a fluent user. For the examples, the first number given is the number assigned to the paper followed by the line number in that specific paper.

- Examples at the 'Intentional levels' (amount of effort applied to arrive at a full understanding).

In one instance, there was no effort made: *J'aime l'idée de donner le texte écrit qui correspond à ce que l'apprenant écoute* (22-19, 20).

The instructions were to only give the text to look at after the listening activity, clearly the student skimmed the text and did not try to get the full meaning.

Some effort was apparent in a number of texts: *Je ne suis pas certaine ce que les termes veulent dire. Donc si possible, est-ce qu'on pourrait en discuter...?* (9-8,9).

This person identified the barrier caused by a lack of understanding of some terms.

The same is obvious in the following examples:

11-2: *Je n'ai jamais étudié la linguistique donc, je trouve cela un peu difficile à suivre: Que veulent dire la pragmatique et la sociopragmatique exactement?*

11-9: *qu'est-ce que la pré-communicative exactement?*

13-17, 18, 19: *La chose que je n'ai pas vraiment compris{e} de ce chapitre est le concept de réalité métaphorique construite par la langue. Je ne sais pas si c'est un concept essentiel ou non, mais je n'ai pas tout à fait compris!*

Clearly efforts were made according to these comments at various levels.

- Examples under: 'Ability to convey opinion by proper linguistic means'.

Under this category there is great variation going from 'inability to do so' (paper 5) and 'doing so with difficulty' (paper 1) to 'great ability'.

In one case the comment was limited to a general reaction: *je ne suis pas du tout d'accord avec cet énoncé* (10-4,5).

In other cases, the students were quite able to do so: paper 7 was good throughout; other good examples are:

4-27, 28: *Quelques suggestions sont différentes pour les niveaux en 9e année, 10e, pour les explications du fonctionnement de la structure lexicale.*

19-1, 2: *L'accent mis dans ce chapitre sur la prise de conscience du contexte de situation, des pratiques sociales, est, à mon avis, particulièrement pertinent.*

22-30, 31, 32: *Une chose que j'ai appris en faisant ce lecture est la variabilité d'un sens en contexte dans la compréhension de l'écrit. Et l'habileté du lecteur de voir ce qui est explicite et implicite.*

- Examples under the topic: 'Logic'.

There were cases where total confusion was apparent (paper 6) and where a lack of logic was identified (paper 5).

Otherwise there appeared to be a good display of logic in papers 8-1 to 17.

Regarding the following example: 19-22: *On participe chacun à la création de ce qu'on est*. Nowhere in the text was there a reference made to this point, so there is evidence here that a logical conclusion was drawn.

- Examples under the heading: 'Causality'.

Negative causes were identified in the following examples:

7-20: *4 ans d'études ont abouti à un niveau oral pitoyable*

11-5: *Il peut y avoir beaucoup d'anxiété quand les locuteurs natifs sont présents*

11-34, 35, 36: *Vous dites qu'il manque un pont entre les savoirs et les savoir-faire; moi je suis d'accord, car cela est un problème que j'ai. Dans une leçon de grammaire je réussirai, mais quand je dois l'appliquer j'ai de la misère.*

19-13, 14: *Dans mes cours j'ai hâte d'offrir à mes élèves l'occasion de ce développement à travers, comme le texte suggère, des textes écrits en L2 à propos de la cultures/des cultures de L1.*

32 (end): *on pourrait encourager des gens moins compétents à continuer leurs études de français après la 9e année.* To date most learners drop French after Grade 9. So the suggestion is to have those who don't reach the required level of competence continue their French Studies.

- Examples under the heading: 'Objectivity'.

Not unlike what is required of future teachers these students were level-headed and for the most part no lack of objectivity was identified.

12-8 and 9-16,17 are typical examples.

18-21, 22: *On doit se rendre compte que le contexte culturel et nos expériences personnelles peuvent influencer notre compréhension d'une langue seconde.*

11-7, 8: *Il est important que les apprenants aient des silences plus longs si nécessaire avant de se mettre à interagir, comme vous dites.*

46-19, 21: *Je suis d'accord que le vocabulaire est très important dans l'apprentissage et l'enseignement d'une langue seconde et la qualité, l'étendue et la maîtrise du vocabulaire sont des paramètres essentiels de l'acquisition de la langue.*

3-22, 23: *J'ai beaucoup aimé lire cet article et il m'a beaucoup fait réfléchir sur mon enseignement de la langue étrangère.*

- Under the heading 'Informational Content' we identified the various ways provided for adding information including when we detected bluffing, where there was incomprehensibility and where economy of words corresponded to the use of more abstract language.

Bluff was identified in the following examples: paper 6 and 1-12, 13: *Commence avec un exemple au lieu d'une liste pour catégoriser les idées*. In the latter example the comment was on lay-out but did not add anything to content.

27: *Il y a un article du Reader's Digest [dans lequel on dit] que les américains sont plus polis que les asiatiques et aussi les européens. Il y a des préjugés mais ceci l'est. Peut-être quand on parle de culture, la parole et le résultat on peut utiliser "being direct or indirect" au lieu place de poli et impoli.*

In that example there is no contribution in informational content, rather it appears to be confused talk.

Direct transposition/translation was identified in the following example: 11-9: *En anglais on dirait "longer wait-time"*.

23-13, 14, 15: *Je pense que c'est très important ... qu'on développe l'aud[i]tif... en faisant beaucoup d'activités d'écoute et à l'oral*. In this example the text is repeated.

A number of good contributions were identified:

4-17, 18: *L'expérience vraie d'apprentissage est quand les étudiants essayent d'utiliser la langue eux-mêmes.*

21-9: *donne un tableau à compléter lors de l'étude d'un roman:*

- *Idiome dans le texte*
 - *Qu'est-ce-que ça veut dire*
 - *Idiome semblable en anglais*
- Under the heading 'Contestation and Rejection' the example below identifies a student who is clearly having difficulties in the course:

1-12: *plus d'emphase sur faire et moins étudier* and 1-15,16: *pas d'occasion pour l'auteur de montrer leur connaissance mais place pour poser questions*. This student expresses frustration about the workload involved.
 - Under the heading: 'Disengagement or inertia in meaning transfer'

There are a number of times where ambiguity or ambivalence appear and examples range from a sense of someone totally lost to someone who tries to escape from completing the assignment.

There is also inertia identified: paper 15, this student did not react, in a very odd way seems to have taken segments in the text and placed them side by side, as a result there is, among other oddities, no correspondence between the nouns and the pronouns going with them.

There was an attempt to summarize the text but the words picked and put together make no sense from a professional standpoint, as in the following examples.

31-29: *La plupart des gens avec une langue seconde utilisent leur première langue pour créer des phrases donc quand je vais décoder un texte, je vais utiliser le L1 de mes étudiants pour mieux interpréter ce qu'ils ont écrit.*

17-8: *on peut savoir une chose mais pas un autre. Ce qui est plus important est que tu peux les comprendre.*

In fact the idea, in the text reported on, was to arrive at meaning through context!

In the examples below there is a clear indication of disengagement: in both examples no usefulness is found in the assigned reading. One wonders if it was the same student. There are obvious difficulties in understanding French.

14-8, 9: *Vraiment les mots sont difficiles. Je ne peux pas comprendre vraiment comment ce chapitre est utile au cours.*

1-18, 19: *meilleur usage de notre temps comme enseignant que utiliser les textes très académiques*, and 1, 8, 9: *trop académique et trop ennuyeux.*

- Examples under 'Contestation'.

There is evidence of a negative reaction to the conservatism of the education system, not against the course, in the following examples:

7-21: *Je trouve inadmissible que le système soit encore structuré de cette façon.*

8-17, 18, 19: *Je crois que si nous comme des enseignants nouveaux décider de changer comment nous enseignons, nous pouvons vraiment améliorer l'expérience.*

22-39, 40: In the text it is mentioned that various language abilities come into play together, the student reacted to the text saying the following:

Mais en réalité on sépare les éléments en écoute, écrit, oral, lecture dans les activités en classe et les examens.

- One example of 'Rejection of advice given in the textbook':

35-29, 30: *Le texte mentionne comment des étudiants peuvent savoir la prononciation des mots s'ils utilisent la notation phonétique. Cela m'énervé un peu.*

It is not clear why exactly this student rejects the idea of helping students with pronunciation by showing them how to recognize the phonetic script that is found next to words in good dictionaries. Did the student think that she had to teach phonetics, that was never the case made in the text although some of the students had taken courses in linguistics and therefore could have been able to teach learners the fundamental aspects of phonetics. However this notion was only introduced as being a way to support learners when not in class and trying to remember the sounds of unfamiliar words.

B. Findings when examining data with the complexity scale

The second treatment shows a continuum for each category from minus to plus, or simple to complex. The Duran and Ramaut complexity scale results were entered under the following overarching parameters: "the world" (Table I), "the task" (Table II), and "the text" (Table III). See the charts below. All in all these university students' utterances were all ranked by analysis to be at least at an average level of complexity.

Parameters	SIMPLE			COMPLEX
(a) World				
1 Level of abstraction : concrete or abstract approach to the topic?	Concrete descriptions (here-and-now)	In other time/space (there-and-then)	Abstract perspective	
2 Degree of visual support : to what extent is visual support provided, and does it support task performance?	Much visual support	Limited visual support	No visual support	
3 Linguistic context : to what extent is linguistic context available, and does it support task performance?	High level of redundancy; low information density	Limited level of redundancy	High density of information; low level of redundancy	

Table I. *World parameters* (Duran & Ramaut 2006)

In section 1, “level of abstraction”: we need to include a ‘Rejection category’, as was identified in the analysis above. “Concrete descriptions” are found in two papers (11, 9), “In other time/space” is found in paper 9 and an abstract perspective is adopted in all papers except for 1, 14, 15, 16, 31.

Under section 2, “degree of visual support”, there was only limited visual support included in three papers, in 21 (a chart), 37 (a column of sound symbols), 43, 44, (in both cases quotes from the text in 16 font followed by short comments), with no visual support in the remaining 42 papers.

As regards section 3, “linguistic context”, a limited level of redundancy was found in papers 1, 14, 15, 16, 43 and 44. All other papers displayed high density of information.

(b) Task (communicative and cognitive processing demands)			
4 Level of processing: what should students do with information in the text? At what level must the information be processed?	Descriptive (understanding information as presented)	Restructuring (reorganizing information)	Evaluative (comparing different information sources)
5 Modality: how should students provide their answers or produce the outcome?	Non-verbal reaction (purely receptive)	Limited verbal reaction (writing/talking at copying level)	Verbal reaction (talking or writing at descriptive level)

Table II. *Task parameters* (Duran & Ramaut 2006)

For section 4, “level of processing”, the category ‘No understanding’ has to be added to the chart as was evidenced in the analysis above. Under “descriptive” there is the use of paraphrase, under “restructuring” there is evidence of some summarizing and under “evaluative” we noted that ideas were seldom confronted to other theoretical concepts but rather the contents of the texts were calibrated against one’s experience.

In section 5, “modality”: Under “non-verbal reaction” we can count the few missing papers that were not sent in for a given week. “Limited verbal reaction” was identified in nine papers. All the other 37 papers displayed a descriptive level verbal reaction.

(c) Text			
6 Vocabulary: is the vocabulary used highly frequent or not?	Highly frequent words	Less frequent words	Infrequent words
7 Syntax: are the sentences simple or complex?	Short, simple sentences	Reasonably long sentences with juxtaposition	Long, embedded sentences
8 Text structure: is the text clearly/ explicitly structured?	Structure is explicit and clear	Structure only partly explicit	Structure is left implicit
9 Text length: is the text short or long?	Short	Reasonably long	Long

Table III. *Text parameters* (Duran & Ramaut 2006)

At “text level” all categories were identified on some text or other but without student identity one cannot study a trend.

Discussion

What can be said about the interface syntax/argumentative structure? An interesting aspect emerged as concerns syntactic versus argumentative concessions. In light of these we investigated the use of grammar, theory of argumentation/critiquing and logic. Both questions related to inertia of meaning from one language to another and the ambiguity or ambivalence permeating the viewpoint of the respondent were addressed.

Finally we explored the implications of this study for intercultural communication (Lantolf 2000; Hofstede 1980; Eco 1983; Borden 1991) and we ask ourselves if it is fair to evoke a disability from bilingualism (Downs 1971; Wiseman & Abe 1986).

In this study the instructor acted as a true interactional partner in the sense described by Van den Branden (2006: 217). Negotiation of meaning and content took place and the instructor was encouraging output throughout the course. Focus on form only took place when appropriate, and the main focus appeared to be on meaning-making with form taking a secondary position or was sometimes not really cared for. Indeed a number of anglicisms were found. The whole class was offered a rich, relevant and communicative input connected to the readings (Lee 1986; McQuillan & Rodrigo 1995; Levine & Haus 1985).

In addition the instructor tried to implement Olson's (2003) joint intentionality principle, and as regards learning goals played out, one could say that a “meeting of minds” was reached, with some staying at the periphery (Gee 1999). In addition the interplay of teacher and student interactions resulted in more language learning and contributed to continuous and intense mental activity. So much so that it was painful to some and as a result we observed disengagement and rejection, yet in time these situations would be resolved through group simulation activities in class.

Our results concur with Borg's (2003: 81) statement regarding teachers he describes as “active, thinking decision makers who make instructional choices by drawing on com-

plex, practically oriented, personalized and context-sensitive networks of knowledge, thoughts and beliefs”.

The mix of reactions channeled through the different aspects of their profession including the practicum school context to which they constantly referred, the students they had, the curriculum, theories of language learning and practical applications, etc. There is much complexity in the cognition teachers rely on, with a mix of blurred distinctions between personal opinions and thoughts and many inextricably intertwined components.

According to Van den Branden (2006) our understanding of interaction comes from an articulation of not only teachers' perceptions and actions but also through taking into account and being influenced, whether consciously or not, by students' actions and their perceptions. This was not only showing in the analysis through the future teachers' discourse as based on their experience with their own pupils during their practicum placement in schools but in the interaction with the theoretical text written by their instructor at the university, with more general implications for individual students' reaction papers. However independent of the on-looking instructor the future teachers' actions and perceptions influenced each other and were also influenced by, as well as having an influence on, their pupils' perceptions and actions and all this was brought into the university course such as these actions were inspired by, and in turn inspired the same actors' perceptions (here the students in the university course) in a 360 degree movement, or a back or forward spin (Brophy & Good 1986). According to Lampert (1985: 190), the course instructor then becomes “a dilemma manager, a broker of contradictory interests who builds a working identity that is constructively ambiguous”. University instructors need to maintain a sense of control over the learning environments that they create and ensure that they remain powerful, otherwise only the meaning attached to practical experiences will constitute the backbone of what these students think and believe about language teaching, when in fact the university course should have a strong impact on teacher cognition and teacher actions in order to prepare them for the future.

In our second analysis we began to wonder if some of these students were experiencing a “muddled level of operation” in the second language. As regards others it appeared that they engaged in contestation and rejection perhaps to cover their inability to synthesize. The translational strategy uncovered was rather unusual for students at that level: they were picking-up words for summarizing like in their mother tongue but because of an apparent lack of mastery of argumentative discourse in L2 and perhaps also in L1, some passages in their texts made no sense. How did these students manage to pass their earlier courses in the language? Did they manage to get their papers assessed as successful because of “complex –sounding” discourse that in fact they did not understand? Would it be possible that instructors rated them as acceptable because they were afraid of sounding stupid if they had said that the complex sounding discourse was incomprehensible. This trend of writing without making sense was namely identified in papers 31, 29 and 34.

We question whether the identified disengagement was not rather evidence of an avoidance strategy so as to not have to deal with sorting out ambiguity and ambivalence.

In conclusion we can say that failure to properly use argumentative discourse could be due to a problem in cross linguistic/cross cultural communication. We can report that we uncovered some potentially emotionally overwhelmed people and perhaps their minds were clouded by task-anxiety, because they could not complete the task, or perhaps because they did not apply themselves or take the time to do so.

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