

**COHERENCE FROM THE POINT OF REFERENTIALS  
/ IN TEXTS READ BY UNIVERSITY STUDENTS**

**Loeci P. de O. Procati\***

One of the problems faced by Brazilian graduate and undergraduate students who have to read in English is related to both the understanding and the utilization of referential forms in the construction of text coherence.

In the view of this author, understanding is the location of an element or expression (referent) to which a given item (referential form) is referring to in the context; utilization can be understood as the use of referential forms as “cues” to the construction of text coherence.

These two abilities are commonly required in class as reading courses have been designed to recover some deficiencies in basic reading students bring from secondary level schools either in the native or in the foreign language. In relation to understanding, it has been observed that frequently students fail to establish reference-relations, that is, when they are asked to identify the referent to which a certain referential form is referring to in the context, very commonly the referent identified is other than the one which is being referred to.

As to the utilization of referential forms as “cues” to construct text coherence it has been observed the same sort of thing. In an activity

Professora do Departamento de Letras Estrangeiras Modernas da Universidade Federal de Santa Maria.

Mestranda do Curso de Pós-Graduação em Letras da mesma Universidade.

where students are asked to reorder coherently some randomized sentences or paragraphs of a text, it has been noticed that among the wrongly reordered ones there are always some containing referential forms that could have been used to discover their location in the context.

These situations converge to one point: the difficulty some students (maybe the poorer readers) have to detect the stream of meaning carried through a text by referential forms. And this is crucial for a text to be perceived as a meaningful unit. Meyer-Hermann supports this view:

*... all reference-relations take an essential part in the constitution of what has been called the "coherence" of a text, namely, in what distinguishes a "text" from a "meaningless" sequence of acoustic events, and makes it a unit of communicative action.<sup>1</sup>*

Once these difficulties have been observed a doubt needs to be clarified:

a) Do students make these mistakes due to lack of linguistic knowledge in the foreign language,

or

b) Do these mistakes take place because students have a bad understanding of referential forms even when they read in their native language?

The need to answer these two questions led to the present research.

The study considers coherence as the mechanism which distinguishes a meaningless sequence of sentences from a meaningful unit. Koch and Travaglia<sup>2</sup> maintain that it is coherence through its various factors that turns any linguistic sequence into a text so that it can be perceived as a meaningful unit.

Coherence can be local and global as Van Dijk & Kintsh propose. Local coherence is comprehended as *"a property of discourse which is defined in terms of semantic relationships between the successive sentences of the discourse."*<sup>3</sup> Global coherence, on the other hand, is related to the global aspect of a text in the form of theme or topic.

<sup>1</sup> MEYER-HERMANN, R. Topics in the study of referentials in portuguese. *Readings in Portuguese Linguistics*, North-Holland Publishing Company, Amsterdam, 1976.

<sup>2</sup> KOCH, Ingedore Villaça, TRAVAGLIA, Luiz Carlos. *A Coerência Textual*. São Paulo: Contexto, 1991.

<sup>3</sup> DIJK, Teun A. van, KINTSCH, Walter. *Strategies of Discourse Comprehension*. London: Academic Press Inc., 1983. p. 150.

Even though a great number of factors contribute to construct the coherence of a text<sup>4</sup> the scope of this study was limited to linguistic elements, that is, in this case coherence is considered to be inside the text only. At this point it can be assumed that coherence coincides with cohesion as the latter is considered “*the over relationship between propositions expressed through sentences.*”<sup>5</sup>

Halliday & Hasan maintain that

*cohesion occurs where the interpretation of some element in the discourse is dependent on that of another. The one presupposes the other, in the sense that it cannot be effectively decoded except by recourse to it.*<sup>6</sup>

Koch considers two different types of text cohesion: sequential and referential – the latter being the one which is related to the objectives of this study. The author sees referential cohesion as “*aquela em que um componente da superfície do texto faz remissão a outro(s) elemento(s) do discurso textual*”.<sup>7</sup> She classifies referential forms into two categories: “*formas remissivas não referenciais (presas and livres)*” and “*formas remissivas referenciais*”. By “*formas remissivas não referenciais presas*” she understands those forms that precede a noun or a modifier in a noun phrase; the “*livre*” ones do not precede a noun in the noun phrase but are used to replace cataphoric or anaphorically, one or more elements in the text. By “*formas remissivas referenciais*” she understand those noun phrases giving instructions of agreement and at the level of reference meaning.

Koch considers some other important aspects in relation to referential cohesion/coherence: the element of reference can be represented by a noun, a noun phrase, part of a sentence, a sentence...; the referent is reconstructed textually due to elements added to it as text progresses; there is no need to have referential or grammatical identity between the referent and the referential form; reference can be anaphoric (back-referring) or cataphoric (antecipatory).

<sup>4</sup> KOCH, I. V., TRAVAGLIA, L. C. Op. cit.

<sup>5</sup> WIDDOWSON, H. G. *Teaching Language as Communication*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983. p. 29.

<sup>6</sup> HALLIDAY, M. A. K., HASAN, R. *Cohesion in English*. London: Longman, 1976. p. 4.

<sup>7</sup> KOCH, Ingedore Villaça. *A Coesão Textual*. São Paulo: Contexto, 1989. p. 30.

Thus, in this study, text is seen as a meaningful unit marked by cohesive relations. These markers play an important role to bind a text together, so that it can be perceived as coherent. In this context, a proper understanding of referential forms is essential as the reader has to follow all the changes experimented by the referent as text progresses in order to grasp the stream of meaning that perpasses through it.

As was mentioned previously this investigation was carried out in an attempt to identify a possible explanation for the mistakes students make when they utilize referential forms to construct the coherence of a text read in English.

It was hypothesized that

a) students make these mistakes due to lack of linguistic knowledge in the foreign language;

b) these mistakes take place because students have a bad understanding of referential forms even when they read in their native language.

The subjects involved in the investigation were 19 students taking Inglês II at Curso de Letras (Universidade Federal de Santa Maria). These students were first asked to do ACTIVITY 1; as soon as this activity was finished, it was handed over to the teacher and ACTIVITY 2 had to be done.

Actually the subjects were exposed to an English and a Portuguese version of the same text (see the originals in the appendix) whose sentences were in random order. In both versions the title was omitted to force the use of cohesive elements to construct text coherence.

When ACTIVITY ONE was delivered to the students, it was read and explained. Special attention was given to question number 2 where the students had to describe the strategies used to do the task. Examples were provided so that they understood what was meant by strategy.

From the 19 students tested only 2 (10,52%) made no mistakes in ACTIVITY ONE; and 5 (26,31%) made no mistakes reorganizing the text in ACTIVITY TWO. Table 1 illustrates some of the mistakes made by the rest of the group.

ACTIVITY ONE

**A. As sentenças que compõem cada um dos parágrafos do texto a seguir estão desordenadas. Reorganize-as de maneira coerente.**

**Observe que os parágrafos estão marcados com números e as sentenças com letras. Escreva na grade abaixo a seqüência que você considera adequada.**

1. c) It is expected to attract a large flow of tourists to the entire area.
1. a) The Caminhos do Mar (Roads to the Sea) Park is being built along the Billings Reserve on the south end of the city, between Caminho do Mar e Calçada do Lorena.
1. b) São Paulo, a city with a low ratio of green area to inhabitants, can rejoice: a new park will be available to the population before the end of 1989.
2. a) Remarkable examples of the civil engineering of two different periods, the two roads played strategic roles in connecting to the seashore what would eventually become the largest city in Brazil.
2. b) Calçada do Lorena, built in the late 18th century, and Caminho do Mar, constructed in the beginning of the 20th century, have been closed to visitors for several years.
3. (...)
4. a) According to Bruno Padovano, of Padovano & Viglicca Architects, the visual results are simple, uncomplicated lines, close to the language of industrial architecture.
4. b) The park is owned by the São Paulo electrical utility, Eletropaulo heir to the Canadian The São Paulo Traction, Light & Power Co.
4. c) The utility commissioned an architect's office to design the buildings and a landscape architect to lay out the vegetation of the complex.
5. a) Old lampposts have been turned into pillars.
5. b) An example is the use of scrap material supplied by the electrical utility in the buildings structure.

(Ícaro, nº 61, p. 8)

RESPOSTAS

1	1	1		2	2		3		4	4	4		5	5	

**B. Estratégia mais comumente adotada na realização desta tarefa:**

.....

.....

.....

ACTIVITY TWO

A. As sentenças que compõem cada um dos parágrafos do texto a seguir estão desordenadas. Reorganize-as de maneira coerente.

Observe que os parágrafos estão marcados com números e as sentenças com letras. Escreva na grade abaixo a seqüência que você considera adequada.

1. a) O parque Caminhos do Mar - que está em construção às margens da represa Billings, na zona sul da cidade, entre a estrada Caminho do Mar e a Calçada do Lorena, deverá atrair um fluxo turístico saudável para toda a região.
1. b) Uma cidade com pouca área verde por habitante como São Paulo já pode festejar o anúncio de mais um parque a ser inaugurado até o final deste ano.
2. a) Notáveis pela arquitetura de épocas distintas, as duas estradas desempenham papel estratégico na ligação viária entre o litoral e a capital do Estado, que viria a ser a maior cidade do Brasil.
2. b) A Calçada do Lorena, do final do século XVIII, e o Caminho do mar, do início deste, estão desativados à visitação há alguns anos.
3. (...)
4. c) A empresa contratou um escritório de arquitetura para projetar os prédios e um paisagista que organizou, em conjunto com o escritório, a flora do novo espaço.
4. d) Um exemplo disso será a utilização de materiais de sucata da própria empresa na estrutura do prédio: os antigos postes usados para iluminação viraram pilares de sustentação.
4. b) A proprietária do parque é a empresa estadual distribuidora de energia elétrica, Eletropaulo, a antiga Light canadense.
4. a) O resultado plástico, segundo Bruno Padovano, da Padovano & Vigliecca Arquitetos, são formas simples e despojadas, próximas da linguagem industrial.

(Ícaro, nº 61, p. 6)

RESPOSTAS

1	1		2	2		3		4	4	4	4

B. Estratégia mais comumente adotada na realização desta tarefa:

.....

.....

.....

Number of Paragraph	Mistake	Percentage of Students	
		Activity One	Activity Two
2	Started the paragraph by sentence 2a	42.10%	26.31%
4	Started by sentence 4c, or placed it before sentence 4b	63.15%	36.84%
4	Started by sentence 4d, or placed it before sentence 4a		36.84%
5	Started by sentence 5a	21.05%	

Note: The dash above indicates that the structure used is not interchangeable between both texts.

TABLE 1: Some mistakes made by the students in ACTIVITY ONE and in ACTIVITY TWO.

Data show that with the exception of some differences probably caused by linguistic limitations in the English language in general students made the same sort of mistake in both languages. This result favors hypothesis b, that is, students have a bad understanding of referential forms even when they read in Portuguese.

Carioni found similar results. The author analyzed Brazilian University students comprehension of two types of contextual reference in English and in Portuguese. She attempted to verify if their difficulties in reading English were related more to English language limitations or to difficulties in processing text in general.

Carioni concluded that

*On the whole, students were able to find the antecedent, or rather choose it when presented with alternatives, fairly well, but those who were poor at finding the harder antecedents (...) were poor at this in both languages.*<sup>8</sup>

Another aspect observed in this study is that, in both languages, students failure to reorganize the text coherently is generally caused by the establishment of faulty referential relations which, in turn, are related to both difficulties of language processing and poor reading habits. The following sets of examples illustrate these facts:

a) The referential form "*disso*" was interpreted as back-referring to different referents by different students.

**Example 1:**

- 4. a) A empresa contratou um escritório de arquitetura para projetar os prédios e um paisagista que organizou, em conjunto com o escritório, a flora do novo espaço.
- 4. b) Um exemplo *disso* será a utilização de materiais de sucata da própria empresa na estrutura do prédio: os antigos postes usados para iluminação viraram pilares de sustentação.

**Example 2:**

- 4. c) A proprietária do parque é a empresa estadual distribuidora de energia elétrica, Eletropaulo, a antiga Light canadense.
- 4. b) Um exemplo *disso* será a utilização de materiais de sucata da própria empresa na estrutura do prédio: os antigos postes usados para iluminação viraram pilares de sustentação.

b) Some students did not read the whole text before starting its reorganization. If they had done this, maybe they had noticed that sentence 4.b would be better located at the beginning of the paragraph and not in the position chosen by one of the students as the following sequence shows.

- 4. c) The utility commissioned an architect's office to design the building and a landscape architect to lay out the vegetation of the complex.
- 4. b) The park is owned by the São Paulo electrical utility, Eletropaulo, heir to the Canadian The São Paulo Traction, Light & Power Co.

There are aspects worth mentioning in relation to the strategy mostly followed by the students to reorganize the sentences. This question was placed to them at the end of each activity. Their answers can be summarized as follows:

– Some students mentioned they had followed "certain words" as



“cues” to discover the sequence of sentences in each paragraph but did not cite them.

– Other students said they had used the sequence of ideas but gave no indication about the means used to follow them in the text.

– The majority of the students mentioned the use of certain reading strategies as cognates, known words... in Activity One and what they learn as parts of a text or paragraph – introduction, development and conclusion – in Activity Two.

– Only two students mentioned referential forms and one of them exemplified them using “disso” as one of the “cues” he had followed.

One thing seems relevant about the strategies described by the students: very few students related the strategies used to reorganize the text in Activity One to those used in the reorganization of the text in Activity Two. It means that the majority of them are not aware of the similarities that the Portuguese and the English language share as far as the interrelation between sentences is concerned.

James states:

*... I suggest that it is the formal devices which differ from language to language, while the relationships that one can obtain between sentences are very probably universals...<sup>9</sup>*

Another aspect to be highlighted is in relation to the inaccuracy of the descriptions offered by the students about the strategies used to reorganize the text in both activities. Probably they are not able to report them precisely because they were not aware of them. In other words, students were not conscious of the processes taking place in their minds at the time they were not conscious of the processes taking place in their minds at the time they were doing the task. Holt maintains that “*part of being a good student is learning to be ware of one’s own mind and the degree of one’s own understanding.*”<sup>10</sup>

Despite of several limitations of this exploratory study, it can be concluded that probably students difficulties to utilize referential forms to construct text coherence derive much more from difficulties related

---

<sup>9</sup> JAMES, Carl. *Contrastive Analysis*. London: Longman, 1980. p. 104.

<sup>10</sup> Apud BROWN, Ann L. *Metacognitive Development and Reading*. In: Spiro et al. (org) *Theoretical Issues in Reading Comprehension*. New Jersey: L. Erlbaun, 1980. p. 459.

to text processing than from linguistic deficiencies in the foreign language.

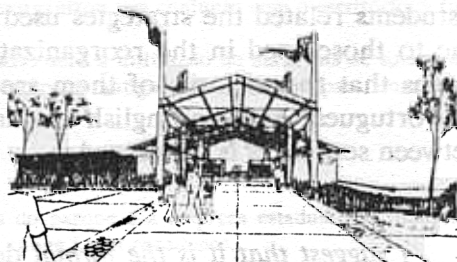
Thus, it is the role of school to provide students with a number of activities to help them become competent readers both in the native and in the foreign language. No doubt this should start by a change in school programs leaving isolated sentences out and including texts from the most different sources so that students see them as a semantic whole.

Also, greater attention should be given to the development of metacognition in a sense that students become aware of the formal text devices used to hold ideas together.

### A new park between two historical roads

São Paulo, a city with a low ratio of green area to inhabitants, can rejoice: a new park will be available to the population before the end of 1989. The Caminhos do Mar (Roads to the Sea) Park is being built along the Billings Reserve on the south end of the city, between Caminho do Mar and Calçada do Lorena. It is expected to attract a large flow of tourists to the entire area.

Calçada do Lorena, built in the late 18th century, and Caminho do Mar, constructed in the beginning of the 20th century, have been closed to visitors for several years.



Remarkable examples of the civil engineering of two different periods, the two roads played strategic roles in connecting to the seashore what would eventually become the largest city in Brazil.

When the park is opened

the two roads will become a part of a 300,000 square meter (74 acres) leisure complex. The park will have parking space for 300 cars, bus stops and sidewalks connecting the artificial lake to a center made up of two buildings with lava-

tories, a snack bar, several locker rooms and an information counter.

The park is owned by the São Paulo electrical utility, Eletropaulo, heir to the Canadian The São Paulo Traction, Light & Power Co. The utility commissioned an architect's office to design the buildings and a landscape architect to lay out the vegetation of the complex. According to Bruno Padovano, of Padovano & Viglietta Architects, the visual results are simple, uncomplicated lines, close to the language of industrial architecture.

An example is the use of scrap material supplied by the electrical utility in the building's structure. Old lampposts have been turned into pillars.

Ícaro, nº 61, p. 8

### Um parque entre duas estradas históricas

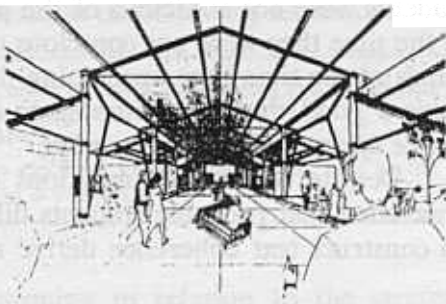
Uma cidade com pouca área verde por habitante como São Paulo já pode festejar o anúncio de mais um parque a ser inaugurado até o final deste ano. O parque Caminhos do Mar - que está em construção às margens da represa Billings, na zona sul da cidade, entre a estrada Caminho do Mar e a Calçada do Lorena - deverá atrair um fluxo turístico saudável para a toda região.

A Calçada do Lorena, do final do século XVIII, e o Caminho do Mar, do início deste, estão desativados à visitação há alguns anos. Notáveis pela arquitetura de épocas destina-

tas, as duas estradas desempenham papel estratégico na ligação viária entre o litoral e a capital do Estado, que viria a ser a maior cidade do Brasil.

Em breve, com a inauguração do parque, as duas estradas passarão a fazer parte de um imenso núcleo de lazer com mais de 300 mil metros quadrados. O parque Caminhos do Mar terá estacionamento para 300 vagas, parada de microônibus e calçadas ligando o reservatório ao núcleo central onde ficarão dois galpões com sanitários, lanchonete, vestiários e um posto de orientação.

A proprietária do parque é a empresa estadual distribuidora de energia elétrica, Eletropaulo, a antiga Light casa de fora. A empresa contratou um escritório de arquitetura



para projetar os prédios e um paisagista que organizou, em conjunto com o escritório, a flora do novo espaço. O resultado plástico, segundo Bruno Padovano, da Padovano & Viglietta Arquitetos, são formas simples e despojadas, praxi-

mas da linguagem industrial. Um exemplo disso será a utilização de materiais de sucata da própria empresa na estrutura do prédio: os antigos postes usados para iluminação viraram pilares de sustentação.

Ícaro, nº 61, p. 6