



A study of the role of relative clauses in the simplification of news texts for learners of English

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Abstract

The aim of the current research is to investigate the effects of textual modification upon the distribution of specific linguistic features of news texts when authors adopt an intuitive approach to simplification. The research focuses on the distribution and use of relative clauses (RCs) across three levels of simplification. The analysis of news texts reveals that although many RCs are retained in unmodified form across the levels, RCs are also found to be unique to specific levels, highlighting their role as simplifying devices used to modify lower level texts. Additionally, non-restrictive RCs are systematically omitted from lower level texts, through a process of information reduction. A qualitative analysis provides insights into the intuitive approach to simplification highlighting the effects of information reduction, supply and elaboration upon the distribution and use of RCs in news texts.

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1. Introduction

The debate between using authentic and simplified texts in language teaching has important implications for language learning. Many recent EFL coursebooks opt for authentic and semi-authentic texts; but most lower- and intermediate-level coursebooks still prefer using simplified texts (Young, 1999). However, the popularity of simplified texts in the classroom is not necessarily supported by research into second language reading (Day and Bamford, 1998). Although there has been a reasonable amount of research looking at second language reading and simplified texts (Allen et al., 1988; Carrell, 1987; Crossley et al., 2007; Crossley and McNamara, 2008; Johnson, 1982; Leow, 1993; Honeyfield, 1977; Simensen, 1987; Yano et al., 1994; Young, 1999), the conclusions as to which are more suitable for language learning are far from certain. Notably, there

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is a lack of research which focuses on the linguistic features of simplified texts (Crossley and McNamara, 2008; Crossley et al., 2007). Furthermore, there is a lack of research which investigates the intuitive approach to simplification (Simensen, 1987). The current study, therefore, analyses popular classroom materials simplified by materials writers using an intuitive approach. In order to achieve this aim in a concise format, I focus on a specific linguistic feature, the relative clause.

2. Literature review

2.1. Simplification methodology

There are two main approaches to simplification of texts: the structural approach and the intuitive approach. The structural approach utilizes wordlists and lists of structures graded to different levels of complexity to help authors simplify authentic materials. Authors of graded readers, for example, the *Penguin Readers Series*, typically adopt this approach (see Hill, 2008 for a recent review of graded readers). To illustrate, let us consider the usage of relative clauses (RCs) in the *Penguin Readers* six level course ranging from 1 (easy start) to 6 (advanced). The introduction of RCs begins at level 3 (pre-intermediate) where defining, but not embedded, RCs are used, and with the relative pronouns *who*, *which* and *that*. At level 4 (intermediate) non-defining RCs are introduced, along with the relative pronoun *whose*. At level 5 (upper-intermediate) defining, embedded RCs are introduced to the syllabus. In addition to these descriptions of RC structure and relative pronoun usage, other features of grammar, such as tense and aspect, are introduced at different stages and therefore gradually increase the complexity of language used in the RC structure (for more information regarding grading scales please refer to publishers' guides, e.g. <http://www.penguinreaders.com/par>).

The structural approach therefore constrains the author of simplified materials into conformity with the boundaries set by the structural syllabus. However, while adhering to these guidelines, authors rely on their intuition to guide the process of simplification. In fact, the intuitive approach tends to dominate in simplification methodology (Young, 1999; Simensen, 1987; Bamford, 1984). Furthermore, many teachers and materials writers are unfamiliar with the structural approach, unsatisfied with its rigidity and also under pressure to produce adapted articles for lessons quickly. As a result texts simplified by way of a purely intuitive approach, that is, without recourse to any structural syllabi, are what learners of English are most likely to come across in the classroom. There are, however, few studies which investigate the effects of modification upon the linguistic features of these texts.

2.2. Simplification of news texts

Newspaper articles are a popular genre for simplification; for example, there is a considerable number of simplified texts available online at Onestopenglish (2007). The value of newspapers as resources for language learning is well-recognized (Sanderson, 1999; Lee, 1995; Little et al., 1989; Bhatia, 1993; Grundy, 1993) and for many language learners, being able to read a newspaper in a foreign language without too much difficulty is seen as 'the holy grail' of language acquisition. Yet being able to read a newspaper in a foreign language presents the learner with a formidable task, not least due to the high density of information compressed into the column inches. Hence, language teachers and material writers simplify these texts to make them more accessible for a greater range of learners at different levels of proficiency. The effect of this simplification upon the linguistic characteristics of news texts has, however, not been researched. The current paper presents what may be the first analysis of ELT material writers' simplification of news texts focusing on a common linguistic feature of news texts.

2.3. The news genre and the complex noun phrase

One of the most striking features of newspaper text is its high concentration of complex noun phrases (henceforth, NPs) creating text which is dense with information, and characteristic of the written style (Biber, 2003; Ni, 2003; Biber et al., 1999). Complex NPs consist of a combination of determiner, premodifier, head noun and postmodifier, as illustrated in (1):

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