

The pragmatics of paragraphing English argumentative text

Iain McGee*



Department of Foreign Languages, University of Nizwa, P.O.Box 33, Birkat Al-Mawz, P.C.616, Nizwa, Oman

Received 19 March 2014; received in revised form 1 April 2014; accepted 4 April 2014

Abstract

Computational linguistic work into the paragraph and paragraphing has highlighted the significant role that intra-paragraph lexical cohesion plays in 'marking off' one paragraph unit from another. The goal of the research reported on in this paper is to consider, in some detail, the relationship that exists between the lexical repetition patterns in an argumentative text (as identified by a computational procedure), the genre moves within it, the actual paragraphing of the texts, and the textual colligation features of the paragraphs. The Link Set Median procedure (Berber-Sardinha, 1997, 2001, 2002) is used to document exact, inflectional and derivational lexical repetition usage across 10 short English argumentative texts, and to predict where segmentations originally occurred in the texts. The resulting data are then analyzed in the light of diverse research interests into the paragraph, and classified accordingly. A comparison of these results is made with data where there is either a marginal or no difference in the link set medians of adjacent sentences across paragraph junctures within the same texts. It is suggested that this novel approach of analyzing computational data from multiple paragraph-specific research interests results in a clearer picture of paragraphing practice emerging.

© 2014 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Paragraphing; Lexical cohesion; Argumentative text; Textual colligation; Foregrounding; Discourse signaling; Rhetorical devices; Computational Linguistics

1. Introduction

The paragraph and paragraphing are poorly understood phenomena. This is not to say that they have not been researched, but there is no current academic (as opposed to pedagogic) book-length treatment of the paragraph and paragraphing,¹ and we are yet to possess a comprehensive theory of paragraphing. Research forays into the subject have tended to be mono-dimensional and atomistic, and, generally, have not contributed to a better *overall* understanding of how and why authors paragraph and how paragraphing affects readers' understanding or retention of information. Part of the reason for this state of affairs lies, no doubt, in the multi-faceted nature and complexity of the paragraph. Another reason is the lack of awareness of relevant research within different linguistic communities – a claim which will be supported in the following discussion.

Since the 1960s, when tensions between prescriptivist and descriptivist approaches to the paragraph came to a head,² descriptivist work has considered the paragraph from a number of perspectives, including psychological, contrastive, discursal, textual, computational, and corpus-linguistic. In this paper we seek to bring together a number of these research interests around a specific text type – the short argumentative text. The starting point of our enquiry is lexical repetition, and lexical repetition cohesion. The reason for this focus is the attested paragraph indicative role of lexical repetition cohesion, as discussed in more detail in section 3.

* Tel.: +968 25446387.

E-mail address: iain@unizwa.edu.om.

¹ Indeed, the only relatively recent academic text which treats the paragraph is Crother's *Paragraph Structure Inference* (1979).

² A key text in this debate, being 'The Sentence and the Paragraph' (1966).

2. Repetition and argumentation

2.1. Repetition

In Halliday and Hasan's (1976) taxonomy of lexical cohesion relations, same item repetition was classified as part of *reiteration* (a term which also enveloped synonymy, hyponymy, superordinates and general relations), a position which was later refined (Hasan, 1984). Hoey (1991) went on to differentiate simple (i.e. inflectional) and complex (i.e. derivational) repetition in text and although there has been some theoretical debate about this classification (see Károly, 2002:101) we utilize the distinction in the research that follows. Hoey used the term *paraphrase* for other lexical cohesive relations in a text, such as synonymy, antonymy and hyponymy.

The particularly powerful role of repetition in creating discourse cohesion has been noted by text linguists (e.g., de Beaugrande and Dressler, 1981), and, as will be noted below, observed by computational linguists who have, further, noted the strong intra-*paragraph* cohesive relations of lexical repetition. The presence, and importance, of lexical repetition in text challenges, in a very objective way, the commonly held assumption that writers of English largely eschew repetition in favor of the use of other *re-iteration* or *paraphrase* relations, and as suggested in certain pedagogical volumes. A plausible reason for this erroneous view may be found in the extrapolation of results from some L2 research which has indicated that weaker non-native speakers may overuse repetition (Witte and Faigley, 1981; McGee, 2009). How repetition actually occurs in text is not uniform: results from some computational linguistic research have indicated considerable variation across different text types in terms of the typical patterns of repetition (see e.g., Teich and Fankhauser, 2005).

From the perspective of the reader, Horning (1993) has suggested that repetition (of various kinds – though including same item repetition), along with redundancy, are the key components of readable writing, calling them “the major characteristics that make possible the connection of reader expectations and writer intention” (p. 4). Although repetition is often considered exclusively in terms of its cohesive role, as Johnstone (1987) notes, this constitutes just one academic perspective, the others being:

- (Repetition as a cohesive device)
- Repetition as a rhetorical device
- The semantic effects of repetition
- Repetition in language learning, linguistic socialization, and language teaching

Of relevance to our interest in argumentative text are the first and second areas of research (although the distinctively rhetorical use of repetition will also, by default, be cohesive as well). With regards to the rhetorical role of repetition Johnstone suggests that it creates ‘rhetorical presence’, and that the effect of repetition can be that it “makes things believable by forcing them into the affective field of the hearer and keeping them there” (p. 208). She suggests that while such an approach to argumentation is not considered particularly prestigious in English, it is, nonetheless, common.

2.2. Logical and genre approaches to argumentation

The subject of argumentation has been considered in various ways, and an approach emphasizing the functional relationships between elements in an argument is Toulmin's (1958) *claim, grounds* (i.e. data) and *warrant* model, (with *rebuttals* provided as necessary). In such a model, a claim might be that marriage is a good thing, the grounds for the claim might be that children born in wedlock derive many benefits from being born into such a state, and the warrant – the logical reason for the link between the claim and the grounds – might be that if benefits are derived from a practice, the practice is prima facie better than a comparable practice to which no such benefits accrue.³ Any argument will contain these generic elements, although it is necessary for our interests here to couch these functional elements into their distinctively textual instantiations. In his genre work on the argumentative essay Hyland (1990) believed there to be three stages in a textual argument (*thesis, argument* and *conclusion*) and suggested that each may contain specific moves, as given below.

Thesis (Stage)

(Moves)

- gambit (attention grabber)
- information (contextualization)
- evaluation (support)
- use of markers to begin a list

³ This specific example is provided as it is part of the argument for marriage, as provided in text 10 (see research section later).

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/932724>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/932724>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)