

Cohesion Is Still Not Coherence, So What Is?

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Abstract. Coherence and cohesion are common and important terms in writing. However, they are sometimes confused, and coherence, in particular, is a difficult concept to understand and explain. If a piece of writing lacks coherence, then it fails in its aim and is meaningless; hence, the importance of coherence cannot be overstated. This article discusses the relationship between coherence and cohesion, showing that cohesion is only one aspect of coherence, and then considers a framework which has been put forward to help both teachers and learners to better understand this crucial concept in writing.

摘要： 连贯与衔接是写作中两个普通但很重要的术语。然而，人们有时会将二者混淆，特别是很难理解和解释连贯概念。如果一篇文章缺乏连贯性，它就会失去目标，变得无意义。因此，无论怎样强调连贯的重要性都不为过。本文首先讨论连贯与衔接的关系，指出衔接仅为连贯的一个方面，然后提出一个概念框架，以期帮助教师和学生更好理解这一关键写作概念。

Introduction

Many authors (e.g. Hoey, 1983; Cook, 1989) state that normal writing is not a random collection of sentences: It has unity and its constituent parts are related in meaningful ways. Language users need to be aware of these relationships, known as coherence and cohesion.

However, coherence is “an elusive concept” (Connor, 1990, p. 72). It has traditionally been thought of as relationships linking ideas in texts to produce meaning for readers (Lee, 2002a, p. 32), but this idea can lead to confusion. Learners can mistakenly think that simply linking sentences together will lead to a coherent whole (Thornbury, 2005).

Cook (1989, p. 4) states that coherent texts are “meaningful and unified.” Without coherence, readers cannot interpret a text; hence, the aim of writing the text is not met. I have encountered many student texts which link sentences cohesively, but still do not produce a meaningful whole. Conversely, some students produce texts which are understandable as a whole despite not showing particularly good use of linking devices. This is because cohesion is simply one aspect of coherence and does not guarantee a coherent text; other aspects (e.g. purpose, structure, and propositional development) are as equally important.

This article firstly discusses the relationship between coherence and cohesion, and shows that cohesion does not always produce coherence. Then it considers other equally important factors of coherence, and reflects upon a useful framework to aid teachers and students to better understand the concept. I concentrate on written discourse (text), and throughout use Cook’s (1989, p. 14) definition of “discourse” as a piece of language that “has unity” and is recognised through “...features outside the language: ...the situation, the people involved, what they know and what they are doing.”

Cohesion

Cohesion in a text is created using formal links that connect sentences and clauses. Halliday and Hasan (1976) are generally regarded as giving the most complete account of these cohesive devices (Brown and Yule, 1983; Nunan, 1993), and they identified five different types: conjunction, reference, substitution, ellipsis, and lexical cohesion. Other linguistic devices have also been suggested that can help to bind text together, including tense consistency and parallelism (Thornbury, 2005). Hence, there are different types of ties that exist in texts, which form cohesion. These formal links can help to make a succession of sentences meaningful.

Coherence and its relationship with cohesion

As stated above, coherence itself is considered a difficult concept to understand and express, and this has led to some rather vague explanations. It has been described as “...the feeling that a text hangs together, that it makes sense, and is not just a jumble of sentences” (Neubauer, 1983, p. 7, as cited in McCarthy, 1991, p. 26). Yule (2006, p. 126) adds that coherence is “everything fitting together well.” However, there is more to coherence than just the cohesive qualities of a text. Yule (2006, p. 126) adds that coherence is something that exists in people’s interpretations, not words or structures. People, he says, “...make sense of what they read and hear. They try to arrive at an interpretation that is in line with their experience of the way the world is.” McCarthy (1991, p. 26) asserts that when understanding texts, we interpret items and understand them. Cohesive items are often indications of how texts should be read, not “absolutes” (McCarthy 1991, p. 26). For instance, the pronoun ‘it’ in a text only tells us something non-human is being referred to; we do not necessarily know what. Readers can usually interpret this, so that they produce a coherent reading of the text. Hence, cohesion is only support for coherence, and coherence is “something” created by readers while reading a text, this “something” being a logical interpretation to create a meaningful and unified whole.

Halliday and Hasan (1976) argued that cohesion is necessary to create meaningful discourse. However, this has been disputed. Many authors (e.g. Brown and Yule, 1983, p. 196; Widdowson, 1985, p. 30) have given examples of written (and spoken) discourse that have no apparent cohesive ties but demonstrate how they can make up a unified and meaningful whole. Brown and Yule (1983, p.196) state that readers will naturally assume sentences presented as texts are indeed texts, and try to interpret the second sentence after considering the first sentence because they assume semantic relations exist between the sentences. However, Tanskanen (2006, p. 17) claims that these examples are few, with the same ones often quoted. Martin (2001, p. 44) adds that these examples are “short ... and carefully selected” but for those in natural texts, with even only a small number of clauses, the

appearance of cohesion becomes expected. This may be the case, but it would appear that coherence can occur without any explicit cohesion although one can argue that there is actually some form of implicit cohesion which is brought about by the reader’s coherence. Carrell (1982, p. 484) gives such an example of coherence producing cohesion:

The picnic was ruined. No one remembered to bring a corkscrew.

Carrell asserts this is coherent because we can think of a familiar situation in which corkscrews and picnics fit together. However, she adds the text will not cohere for anyone that cannot think of such a situation. Hence, the illusion of lexical cohesion is produced by the text’s coherence, not the other way round.

Many authors have also tried to show that cohesive texts do not necessarily form a unified, meaningful whole. Brown and Yule (1983, p. 197) and Yule (2006, p. 126) both give examples of texts that display cohesive ties but ultimately do not display coherence. However, Tanskanen (2006, p. 18) also considers this type of evidence unsatisfactory as it essentially takes what are “non-texts” with cohesive links. Brown and Yule take a text and rearrange it so that it still has cohesive devices but lacks coherence. Although it cannot be denied that their text displays cohesion, it would seem that, as Halliday (1994, as cited in Tanskanen, 2006, p.18) asserts, this action of changing sentence order in a text is meaningless. The ties in both texts do not produce coherence, and hence are contradictory to the aim of such cohesive devices, which is not only to bind text together but to aid coherence. However, a better example is provided by Witte and Faigley (1981, p. 201, as cited in Carrell, 1984, p. 162):

The quarterback threw the ball toward the tight end. Balls are used in many sports.

Most balls are spheres, but a football is an ellipsoid. The tight end leaped to catch the ball.

The sentences are highly cohesive but not coherent, and do not produce a meaningful and unified whole, because the writer provides information which is irrelevant to the topic, and there is no clear purpose or intended audience. McCarthy (1991, p. 26) gives another example:

Clare loves potatoes. She was born in Ireland.

He says this is cohesive (“she” refers to “Clare”), but is only coherent if the reader shares the

“stereotype ethnic association” between being Irish and loving potatoes, or is willing to assume a cause-effect connection between the two (McCarthy, 1991, p. 26). Thus, cohesion is only part of coherence.

It can be clearly seen that cohesion can help to form coherence (and occasionally vice versa). In addition, a lack of explicit cohesion does not necessarily mean no coherence, although there are underlying forms of cohesion in a coherent piece of discourse which are created by the actual perceived coherence. We have also seen that texts displaying cohesion can lack coherence, and it has been demonstrated that irrelevance or lack of world knowledge can lead to a cohesive text not being coherent. Irrelevance is particularly important because some learners produce “oblique” or “vague” writing (Hinkel, 2011, p. 528), which can appear to be irrelevant.

Explaining Coherence

The importance of understanding coherence for learners cannot be overstated since, as Lee (2002b, p. 139) explains, the concept may be different in their own language. Furthermore, Chinese students may have a weakness in academic English writing because in China there is a comparative lack of emphasis on developing English writing, and few teachers have good English writing skills (Jin & Cortazzi, 2006). Hence, Chinese students may not know the discourse patterns expected and use a background-before-main-point presentation of ideas, often misunderstood by native speaker teachers (Jin & Cortazzi, 2006). These problems may be exacerbated by the college entrance exam, in which the required structures for answers are provided, so students do not need to learn text organisation (Ma, 2012, p.23).

Although Halliday and Hasan (1976) talk about cohesive texts being coherent, Carrell (1982) argues that in order to learn about textual coherence, we must use wider theories than just cohesion, looking at both reading and writing as interactive processes which involve the writer, the reader and the text. Hence, coherence can be viewed as both text based and reader based (Lee, 2002b; Johns, 1986). Text based coherence is primarily defined by the linking of sentences (cohesion) or as the relationships among propositions in the text (Johns, 1986). However, to have reader based coherence means that a text cannot be

considered separately from the reader. Successful interaction between the reader and the text is required for coherence (Carrell, 1982; Hoey, 2001).

The degree to which readers understand intended meanings and underlying structures from texts (thus finding them coherent) depends greatly on whether their reader-selected schemata (expectations) are consistent with the texts (Johnson, 1982, as cited in Johns, 1986, p.250; Miller & Kintsch, 1980, as cited in Johns, 1986, p. 250). These expectations of the content to be introduced and its form are from the readers’ background knowledge (Carrell, 1983). As readers process texts, these expectations are adapted to establish consistency with content or text structure. Hence, reading is a process of constant interpretation (Hoey, 2001), and, as Johns (1986, p. 251) affirms, learners must consider their audience and task throughout the writing process. Furthermore, instructors should consider both text and reader based approaches when teaching coherence (Johns, 1986, p. 251).

Lee’s framework for Coherence

Lee (1998, 2002a, 2002b) expands on the above ideas, outlining six aspects to facilitate the understanding (and teaching) of coherence:

1. Coherent texts have a purpose, intended audience, and context of situation (including genre and reader-writer relationship). This can be introduced at low levels. Students need to know their reader, understand their reader’s expectations, and understand the reason for their writing.
2. Lee’s second topic is knowledge about different types of text structure, which helps with the planning and writing of texts. Students need to know and understand the expected structure for their text.
3. The best, and expected, way to organise information and help develop topics is to use given information before new. Although often relating to cohesive properties of texts, this is an aspect that some learners find difficult (Hinkel, 2011).
4. The fourth of Lee’s topics is propositional development and modification; in other words, how different claims relate to each other and should be supported with, for instance,

elaboration, illustration or exemplification. Johns (1986) also stresses the importance of a thesis & thesis statement in persuasive essays (a common text type my students have to produce), particularly for inexperienced writers.

5. The fifth topic is cohesion, still an important aspect of coherence.
6. Lee's final topic is metadiscourse ('signalling words'). These linguistic features do not add to propositional content, but aid readers with organising, interpreting, and evaluating the provided information (Crismore et al., 1993, p. 40). For instance, in persuasive essays such features can be textual (e.g. connectives and sequencers) or interpersonal (e.g. hedges and attitude markers) (see Crismore et al., 1993).

This clear framework can help both teachers and learners to acquire a better understanding about the notion of coherence. By covering these points, we can raise learners' awareness of the coherence of texts, and the equal importance of each aspect. Although it is quite possible to teach these ideas without mentioning the term coherence, I would argue that higher-level students (such as university students) can be explicitly taught the concept of coherence using this or a similar framework, and that these aspects can be used to give constructive comments to students about the coherence of their texts as well as help to provide a clear structure to aid writing.

Of course, it should not be forgotten that grammar and vocabulary are also important, and too many errors will also cause a lack of coherence. Indeed, I would suggest that they could be added to the list as topic 7 (I often remind my students about this). It has already been shown how a lack of understanding of lexis can lead to confusion; hence, so can the misuse of lexis, and indeed grammar.

It is clear, however, that correct use of vocabulary and grammar does not necessarily produce a coherent text. Language teaching in China, and elsewhere, has traditionally focused on the basis of language knowledge (pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary) while examining how chunks of language become meaningful and unified in context can be neglected. However, it is the latter which draws

learners' attention to the skills they need to use the former in order to achieve successful (coherent) communication (Cook, 1989). It is with this in mind that an explicit method of presenting coherence, such as the one above, is recommended.

Conclusion

In this article, I have clarified the terms coherence and cohesion, explained how they are related and the important roles they play in written discourse. Cohesion is used to help achieve coherence; conversely, coherence is sometimes required to achieve cohesion. However, coherence, a crucial aspect of writing, is not formed by cohesion alone. It is both text based and reader based and there are a number of factors to take into consideration. Hence, a framework for understanding this concept needs to be concerned with all these factors. For myself, such a framework has proved extremely useful.

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