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Cohesion in Student's Academic Writing: A Linguistic Exploration of Language Organization and Meaning-Making

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Abstract

The textual metafunction, as presented by Functional Grammar (FG), entails how language is used to organize the message itself. Its focus is on the ways in which language can be used to create a coherent and meaningful text. Writing is believed by many students to be one of the most difficult skills to be acquired. In an attempt to solve this perceived problem, Functional Grammar (FG), specifically the textual metafunction, is often applied in the teaching of languages since Linguistics is the study of languages that seeks how to know how language works. In extant studies, textual metafunction has often been left unattended to while teaching language, especially writing. Therefore, this paper is an attempt to portray how to apply textual metafunction in writing. The data for this study were taken from the writing assignments given to ten students which were analyzed using the framework of textual metafunction, particularly cohesion. In the study, the use of grammatical cohesive devices is identified as a means of achieving coherence in texts since it implies coming together of sentences. The study submitted that exploring Functional Grammar as a model of analysis will be useful to examine and improve students' writing and to serve as an evidence on the relationship between linguistic links in sentences and textual cohesion.

Keyword: Language, Cohesion, textual metafunction, Functional Grammar, writing

Introduction

Writing is a part of fundamental study of Language which has to do with the act of producing or reproducing written messages. It is regarded as a means of communication between the writer and intended readers. Writing, as a skill is acquired through experience. Writing skill also has to do with composing texts, which is the ability to tell or retell information which can be in the form of narratives, or to change existing information into new texts. Maybe, it is best considered as a continuous

series of activities ranging from more mechanical or formal aspect of "writing down" on the end, to the more complex act of composing on the other end (Hadley 1993). In the process of writing, there is the need for the writer to figure out what to write which should be meaningful. And this is achievable by applying a number of writing strategies. Every writer can learn and adopt these strategies in his or her work. Students are then advised to keep on rehearsing the learned strategies. In some cases, we observe that many students have the problem of how to



write effectively. Yes, they can write but their work is usually far from being coherent. Students are required to generate a whole message that they intend to pass across in the paragraph. The term 'whole' implies that they have to consider the messages they want to convey and the structures of the paragraph.

Functional grammar (FG) is selected as an alternative approach in language teaching since we have an understanding that Linguistics is the study of language that seeks to study how language works. By implication, linguistics can be applied to aid the language students in learning how to use their language. In order to achieve the objectives of this study, the following research questions were raised:

1. What types of cohesive devices were used by the students in their writings?
2. What is the level of coherency of the students' writing after they applied the cohesive devices under textual metafunction in their writings?

Functional Grammar

According to Halliday (2014), "a functional grammar is essentially a natural grammar in the sense that everything in it can be explained, ultimately, by reference in order to know how a language is used." Also, Thompson (1996) projects that FG is a way of using a language to share our experience related to our surroundings, interact with others as well to organize our intended message in a systemic way both in spoken and written. FG is considered

an efficient tool for analyzing and interpreting the how language is to be engaged in both oral and written aspects. Moreover, it plays an effective role in boosting the communicative skills of the language students.

Metafunctions

Functions of language are classified under FG into three different categories known as metafunctions or meanings. The metafunctions are: ideational, interpersonal, and textual meanings.

Interpersonal metafunction involves the speaker's resources for interacting in dialogue and for expressing his or her opinions and attitudes. The second metafunction is ideational meaning and it has to do with grammatical resources for constructing peoples' experiences in and around them, and how people represent reality in natural ways. The third metafunction is the textual meaning; it houses the information flow management function. It involves the organisation of what you have to say, thereby making what you have said to be relevant to the context in which you are speaking. The textual metafunction manages both the ideational and interpersonal metafunctions and distributes them into a flow of information that is already sorted out.

Cohesion

Cohesion is under the textual metafunction of language as identified by Halliday and Matthiessen (2014). It refers to the resources within language provided by clause structure and clause



complexes. Hence, cohesive relations, from the view of Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) are non structural relations which work to help a text hang together. Cohesion occurs where the interpretation of some elements in the discourse is dependent on that of another in that same discourse. Cohesive devices are used to achieve cohesion thereby helping a text to hang together, or to be cohesive leading to "unity of texture".

Two types of cohesion have been identified in the literature. First is grammatical cohesion, second is lexical cohesion which comprises repetition, synonym, antonym, hyponym and collocation. Four types of grammatical cohesion are identified by Halliday and Hasan (1976). They are reference, ellipsis, substitution, conjunction.

Reference

This implies referring expression. These are words whose meaning can only be discussed by referring to other words in the text (Olakolu 2017). Halliday and Hasan (1976) define reference as 'a type of cohesive relation in which a linguistic item, having no semantic interpretation of its own, refers to a thing or place. These linguistic items as noted by Fontaine (2013) make REFERENCE to something else for their interpretation.' Reference refers to system which introduces and track the identity of participant through text (Gerot and Wignell 1994). There are two types of cohesive reference identified in literature: endophora reference, a situation where the item takes its

interpretation from within the text and exophora reference, where the interpretation is found in the situational context that is external to the text. If they are endophoric, they may be anaphoric or cataphoric. Through the figure below we are able to make distinction within the types of reference.

Figure 1 Textual Reference

Halliday and Hasan (1976) further classify reference into three:

a. Personal Reference

Personal reference is reference by means of use in the speech condition realised through the category of PERSON. Personal reference includes the three classes of personal pronoun, possessive determiner, and possessive pronoun.

For example:

Joké and OláOlúwa parked in the garden of the amusement park and watched *their* children. *They* looked out of the car's window at the kids.

In the sentences above, '*their*' and '*they*' are the personal reference of the **Joké and Olá Olúwa**, because the referents are plural.

b. Demonstrative Reference

Demonstrative reference implies reference of location in relation to proximity. It enables the speaker/writer to identify the referent by referring to it in relation to proximity. Basically, this, *these* and *here* insinuate proximity to the speaker; *that those there*, and *then* insinuate distance from the speaker. *This* and *that* are singular in nature



and therefore employed for singular participants; *these* and *those* are employed for plural participant, *here* and *there* are utilised for place circumstance, and *now* and *then* are used for time circumstance.

c. Comparative Reference

Comparative reference implies indirect reference talking about identity or similarity. It is possible for two items to be the same, similar, or different. This type of reference expresses look-alike between things. The look-alike may take the form of identity, where two items are the same thing or of similarity where two things are similar to each other. Each of these has its negative side; there is non-identity, and non-similarity. For example;

1. It is *the same meat* as the one we ate.
2. It is *a similar meat* to the one we ate.
3. It is *a different meat* from the one we ate.

Ellipsis

Another system which serves to organise text into message and which is relevant to this study is the system of Ellipsis. In brief, the starting point of the discussion of ellipsis can be the familiar notion that it is something left unsaid.... 'Unsaid' implies 'but understood nevertheless'... (Halliday and Hasan 1976). In ellipsis, something is understood without saying. Ellipsis represents complete omission of some categories. Ellipsis can be divided into:

a. Nominal ellipsis

For example:

My pastors prayed for the congregation. Both are incredibly wonderful.

In the example above '*my pastors*' is omitted.

b. Verbal ellipsis: For example:

A: have you been reading?

B; yes I have (*been reading*)

In the example above, the verb *been reading* is omitted.

c. Clausal ellipsis: For example:

A; Ade is going for a walk, isn't he?

B: He didn't tell me (*he was going for a walk*)

In the example above the clause '*he was going for a walk*' is omitted.

Substitution

This is similar to ellipsis; it happens when one word is substituted with another word instead of omitting it as realised in Ellipsis. Substitution can be divided into:

a. Nominal substitution: For example:

A: There are some new knives on the cabinet; these *ones* are blunt.

In the example above the noun '*knives*' is substituted with *ones*

b. Verbal substitution: For example:

Does she sing?-yes she *does*

In the example above, the verb '*sing*' is substituted by '*does*'



c. **Clausal substitution:** For example:

A: Is she going to church?

B: I don't think so.

In the example above, the clause *going to church* is substituted by *so*.

Conjunction

This cohesive device creates cohesion by relating sentences and paragraphs to each other through the use of words taken from the grammatical class of conjunction. Conjunction can be divided into:

a. **Temporal conjunction:** *after, while, when, meanwhile, before, then, after that, an hour later, finally, at last, at once.*

b. **Causal conjunction:** *because, so, then, therefore, nevertheless, thus, hence, consequently, for this reason, it follows that.*

c. **Additive conjunction:** *and, and also, in addition, moreover, or, or else, further, furthermore, additionally, for instance, alternatively, by the way, in other words, in same way, similarly.*

d. **Adversative conjunction:** *but, however, in any case only, instead, yet, on the other hand, despite this, on the contrary, in fact, anyhow, though, nevertheless.*

Cohesion or Coherence

This means to hold together. In addition to unity, coherence plays an important role in making a paragraph to be well-read. A coherent text comprises of interrelated sentences. Coherence has to do with the way in which the

message which is the concern of the text, known as the textual metafunction, is mutually accessible and relevant. The textual metafunction is believed to consist of concept and relations.

Assignments that have to do with writing so far have been concerned with development of paragraphs. The paragraph is usually a series of sentences that develop a particular topic. A paragraph can be long or short as necessary to develop the topic. The idea behind paragraphing is to indicate a change of thought, idea or change of topic. Because of that, each paragraph must be limited to a single topic or idea.

Method

The data of the students' writing were obtained from the writing assignment that was given to 10 students. They wrote about things related to their personal life in the assignment. Like what they did during the weekend, during the compulsory holiday, their hobbies and family life etc. They were asked to write a paragraph with a certain topic, both in English and Yoruba language. The samples are conditioned to represent all students' writing ability whether low or high. Before conducting the analysis, the students were first given the assignment, and then the teacher explained the basic idea about textual metafunction, especially cohesion to the students so that the students can get the idea about it. The students were asked to re-write the assignment after the explanation. Meanwhile, the techniques of data analysis are as follows: first is



reading all the students writing to examine the number of clauses, then the data of the students' writings were segmented into clauses, after the data were classified into each clause then, the clauses are analyzed in relation to cohesive devices to get the writing flow of the students' texts, and the last is analyzing the coherency of the students' writings based on the cohesiveness identified. For the purpose of this study, the errors concerning grammaticality or spellings are ignored.

Findings and Discussion

There were identified problems with faulty reference in examples such as the following ones in which there is no agreement between the pronoun and the word it is referring to, or situations when it is not clear what the reference of the pronoun is. These examples below show that students did not keep in mind that pronoun must agree in number with their antecedents, or that the antecedent of a pronoun must be made to be clearly understood.

*Many of the church members explained **his** situation to the pastor.* (The reference 'his' which is singular is meant to refer to 'Many of the church members')

*Kemi told Lola **she** had to read the novel* ('she' here can refer to either Kemi or Lola).

*Niyi saw his friend as **he** was walking across the gate* ('he' can refer to Niyi or his friend).

To correct these identified problems, the students were introduced to concepts that could help them to write better, such as the different cohesive devices introduced by Halliday and Hasan (1976): reference, substitution, ellipsis and conjunction. *Endophora* reference is a relationship of cohesion which helps to define the structure of a text. It is divided into anaphora, which means reference to preceding text, and cataphora, which is reference to succeeding text. On the other hand, *exophora* reference is the type of reference that creates relationships between an item in the text and something outside the text itself, found in the context of utterance. This term refers to all those extra-linguistic factors which have some bearing on the text itself.

It was also discovered from their assignments that students were unable to use certain words in the appropriate register in their writings. An instance is given in Yoruba below:

Ayẹyẹ oṣọ ìbí Láyínnká **gbẹnután**. 'Layinka's birthday party was amazing'

Although, it is normal for teenagers to create some words that are normally used to communicate between them as slangs but they have to realise that these coined slangs cannot be used in that context. For example, **o gbẹnután** is a common slang among students which still came up in their assignment (instead of other more appropriate in written language).



To rectify these errors, the students were made to be aware of the different contexts surrounding them and their texts: the context of situation, the context of culture, etc., and were encouraged to create context in their written texts. When students understand context, they are much more likely to write effectively.

Cohesion Analysis

The table below is the result of the students' writings after implementing cohesive devices in their writings. This table is an indication that the students can reduce the inconsistencies and errors in their writings, if taught the right thing to do.

Grammatical Cohesive Devices employed by 10 Students in their Writings

SN	Types of cohesive devices		Number	Percentage
1	Reference	Personal reference	64	36.2
		Demonstrative Reference	13	7.3
		Comparative reference	7	3.9
2	Conjunction	Additive	18	10.2
		Adversative	20	11.3
		Causal	23	15.3
		Temporal	27	15.3
3	Substitution		1	0.6
		total	177	100

The table above shows that 177 grammatical cohesive devices were discovered in the students' writings. The dominant cohesive device in the students' writings is reference. It is observed from the table that personal reference is the highest of all and it was used 64 times. These personal references can help students to connect the sentences to other sentences. The students tilt towards the use of personal references because they believe that its use makes it easier to write a text. The examples of these references taken from their assignments: personal, comparative and demonstrative references are given below:

a. Personal reference

For example:

*...Because amusement park is a place where people like to be refreshed when **they** want to let go of their stress. **It** can help **them** to be more relaxed after work, school, or any other activity and help **them** to ease **their** mind from day to day stress.*

It can be seen in the example above that this student was able to create a cohesive text. Personal pronouns such as '**they**, **it** and **them**' made the writing more meaningful. The personal pronoun *it* in the second sentence refers to *Amusement park* in the first sentence, this is an



indication that the students are able to develop their writing cohesively. 'They' is another personal pronoun found in that first sentence which refers back to *people*. This pronoun occurs in the same sentence as its referents.

b. Demonstrative reference

The students applied demonstrative pronouns '*this*' and '*that*' to point to a certain reason found in the previous clause. An instance of this demonstrative pronoun is illustrated in the example below:

*Nowadays, plenty people love to eat fast foods, not only children, but also adults like **this** habit.*

It is observed in the example above that the demonstrative pronoun *this* refers '*eating fast foods*' in the previous clause. Here, the student tried to explain that '*eating fast foods*' has become a very common habit for many people of all ages lately. By doing this, the student has produced a sentence that is logical through the use of cohesive devices.

In addition to all these, the students also employed conjunctions in their writings to relate one clause to other cohesively.

a. Temporal conjunction

The extract below is an example of temporal conjunction used by a student.

*So, we will there is no way we can be easily tired **when** we do a lot of exercises.*

In his writing, the student shares his ideas through the use of temporal conjunction '*when*'. The temporal conjunction '*when*' shows that there is time relation after the person mentioned in the text did many exercises, thus, they will not be tired.

b. Additive conjunction

The example below is an instance of another type of conjunction used by the students in their writing. It is known as additive conjunction. For example:

*It would make people to become fat **and** destroy his/her health status.*

The additive conjunction '*and*' as used above explains that there is relation between both the first and second clauses. The student described that someone's health can be negatively affected if the person is fat.

c. Adversative conjunction

Below is an example of adversative conjunction as used by the student in his text.

*Actually the wife abuser may try to abuse at the first time maybe just for fun **but**, after that, they want to continue it again and again until they have become addicted to the evil act.*

Here, the student employs conjunction '*but*' in his writing to show a contrast between the previous clause and the second clause.



The least number of cohesive devices found in the students' writings is

substitution. Only 1 example is found in the students' assignments.

*Especially children who loved to spend money buying dresses, shoes, shirts, and toys and **some** also like to go to cinema to watch new films. **Some** others like window shopping.*

The word 'some' in the extract above refers to *children* in the first clause. In this example, the student successfully substituted 'children' with 'some'.

Based on this analysis and findings from the assignments done by the students, it can be concluded that the writings of the students are coherent.

Conclusion and Recommendation

This study has investigated the effect of the application of Functional grammar, especially the textual metafunction on students writing. The study has shown that the type of cohesive devices applied mostly by the students is personal reference. It is, then, followed by conjunctions. The least cohesive device employed by the students is substitution with only one instance found in the students' writings.

Based on the findings above, it is recommended that teachers/lecturers should pay attention to this theory, and explain the significance of textual metafunction in writing to the

students so as to help them achieve cohesion in their work. Teachers should encourage the students to adopt theories as presented to them in practice. It is not a must for the students to memorize the theories, but more importantly they should be able to apply them in their writings.

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