

Summary Writing and Summary Evaluation: A Method Based on Semantic Discourse Analysis

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ABSTRACT

The present paper claims there is a need to systematize student summary writing and subsequent teacher evaluation, so as to avoid the high degree of subjectivity often found in both parts of the process, and the difficulties it poses for students and teachers alike. For this purpose, a method based on the theoretical principles of semantic discourse analysis is proposed. To test the method 47 summaries of a given text are analysed. The subjects were students of English as an FL: 2/3 of them had received prior training in semantic discourse analysis, 1/3 hadn't. The contrast between the two groups serves to measure how semantic knowledge (or lack of it) influences results. As opposed to the untrained group, the group with previous semantic training almost radically eliminates subjective components from their summaries and allows for more objective and accurate evaluation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Summary writing is a key exercise in language learning. In second language acquisition, its practice serves various purposes. It is used as a way to test the student's correct understanding of the passage read. It helps as well to develop the student's skills in paraphrasing, an activity which, in a language that is not one's own, demands a broad knowledge of alternative vo-

cabulary and a good control of structures. In addition, the need to reduce the length of the passage and to synthesize its ideas requires a capacity to distinguish the gist from all irrelevant information. Many of the books we use in our classes of English as an FL at University Level include general directions about how summaries should be dealt with, and I presume language teachers must have their own rules and ideas about how the task should be undertaken. It is a fact, however, that the strong degree of subjectivity involved in the summarising activity frequently converts the routine of summary writing and summary evaluation into an arduous enterprise for both students and teachers. After careful consideration of the problem, I have come to the conclusion that for a method to be valid and effective, it must meet at least the following requirements: it must be systematic and simple enough to be reasonably easy for teachers to teach, and for students to apply, it should also permit an easy identification by the teacher of the steps taken by the student during the process of production to make the evaluation procedure objective and clear. At the same time it should be flexible enough to be compatible with the certain degree of individual variation which is an unavoidable part of the individual practice of summary writing. If all these properties are combined, the method becomes efficient and economical, in the sense given to the terms by de Beaugrande of «greatest returns [for both students and teachers] for the least effort» (1980: 21, 272).

I wish to discuss here some options developed within the field of Discourse Analysis, beginning with T. A. van Dijk (1977, 1980). Although his main interest was not the study of summary writing, van Dijk explored the issue as part of his investigation of textual macrostructure. He presented the concepts of intuitive summary, local propositional topic, and global macrostructure, as correlates, and proposed analysing the intuitive summarising skills of native speakers as a way to determine the theoretical macrostructure. From observations of the summarising process, he formulated a set of semantic derivation or inference macrorules (1980: 46), which included: 1) *A deletion/selection rule* according to which the irrelevant information of a text would be deleted and only the relevant aspects would be selected for general summary. 2) *A generalization rule* which intends to build general abstractions out of more specific, though related, semantic items. 3) *A construction rule* where a set of «normal components, conditions, or consequences...» (1980: 48) pertaining to a fact or action are substituted by the corresponding global fact that subsumes them. 4) *A zero rule* which reproduces what is found in the original, either because it is essential, or is a primitive.

The application of these rules seems to me to reflect what actually goes on in the summarising process. Inverting the procedure would appear to provide a means, first, to elaborate the summary, and then to evaluate it. The problem is that the basis for the rules is not determined systematically by van Dijk. On the contrary, they are built on the intuitive knowledge and expe-

rience of the native speaker. This surely poses problems for language learners in general, and for second language learners in particular, because, once more, the decisions of what to delete, what to keep, what to construct, what to rephrase, and so on is left to the personal criterium and skills of each individual. The rules cannot possibly be taught in a way which is systematic and objective enough to guarantee the desired results.

An attempt to test the operational capacity of van Dijk's model is found in Fløttum (1985). Her article deals with the analysis and description of summaries within the teaching-learning framework, and her corpus consists of «an authentic French text and five summaries written by French students in their first year in the *Lycée*» (1985: 291). In her analysis Fløttum applies van Dijk's four macrorules, and also organizes «the "most important" lexical items into semantic-pragmatic chains» (1985, 294), so as to compare the order and hierarchy in which these lexical items appear in the original and how they are represented in the summaries. She admits that the selection of the lexical items she labels «most important» is, again, intuitive, but the fact that most of them are actually recovered in the summaries serves to validate the practice. The results of her work are, according to her, doubly useful. First, they confirm the notion that her subjects made use of the operations involved in van Dijk's macrorules; second, Fløttum discovered that van Dijk's macrorules were insufficient in one respect: they did not explain what she termed: «additions to the original», whereby «the addition can be an insertion of the student's own opinion, or it can be a misinterpretation of some point in the original» (1985: 295). Four out of the five summaries she analysed included these additions.

The reason why the phenomenon of additions is not covered in van Dijk's rules may simply be that they are not a part of the actual macrostructure of the text. Neither «the student's own opinion», nor «a misinterpretation» are essentially related to the text internal properties, or to the reader's interpretation of it (van de Velde, 1986: 45). As a matter of fact, van Dijk did contemplate to a certain extent the (writer's / reader's) interpretative function when he added to his generalization macrorule an «interpretive component» where «contextual factors, such as the knowledge, beliefs, tasks, goals and interests of language users» found a place (1980: 51). But within the evaluating framework, a *misinterpretation* might easily be considered a *mistake* (the text has not been correctly or accurately interpreted), while a personal opinion would be simply seen as surpassing the limits expected in a summary exercise. In everyday communication text summarising is a common activity (eg. when you recount a story, an episode, a film) which need not be objective: personal interpretation of the event is quite common and opinions are freely accepted. But in a classroom exercise there is a difference between a summary and a personal opinion of a given text. In her presentation Fløttum outlines the problem, but offers no further solution.

2. PROPOSAL FOR A COMPLEMENTARY APPROACH

In view of this, the need seems to be for a a method of summary writing which, besides making use of van Dijk's macrorules, teaches students how to distinguish between the actual macrostructure of the text that will eventually become the core of their summaries, and their own responses towards the text. A way to achieve this might be to instruct students on the techniques of semantic discourse analysis, and to teach them those notions which we consider central to the practice of summary writing, and which can be developed around the global notion of discursive topic. Although such a method would be valid for both L1 and L2 students, here we will be concerned only with L2.

Brown and Yule's work (1983) on the concept of topic of discourse also starts from an intuitive basis, but soon becomes systematic enough to permit method development. First of all, they consider «how the notion of "topic" relates to representations of discourse content», and, connected with this, they formulate «the possibility of characterizing "topic" in terms of the top-most elements in the hierarchical representation» (1983: 68). This is given as a first step in their topic delimitation process, and is also valid for summary elaboration. When the information contained in the text is seen as hierarchically organized, the discrimination which is part of the practice of summary writing (e.g. van Dijk's rule of deletion) becomes systematic. If students are taught to examine the texts in terms of 'top-most elements' —a term we will discuss in more detail in the following section—, they will have solid, and not merely intuitive, grounds to select what to delete, what to reconvert, and what to keep. This could be in a way related to Fløttum's semantic-pragmatic chains, with the difference that her method was intuitive (1985: 294), while Brown and Yule's is based on the semantic analysis of the given text, at both sentential and discourse levels.

A second aspect Brown and Yule present as essential is the principle that «it is speakers and writers who have topics, not texts» (1983: 68). Attention is thus centred on the writer's goal, and an effort must be made by the student to concentrate on what the text actually says. This should be done in view of the language choices and strategies followed by the writer during the process of production, and which finally conform the verbal text. The student needs to temporarily ignore his/her personal reactions to the text. That does not mean the assumptions or inferences activated by the text are not made, but simply that «what the text "suggests" to us» will be under conscious control. If the principle of «writers have topics» is observed, we might expect to eliminate, at least to an important extent, the phenomenon of 'additions' to the 'topic' that Fløttum observed in the analyses she studied. We argued above that these 'additions' were not included in van Dijk's macrorules, precisely because they were not part of the textual macrostructure.

Neither are they a part of the topic, which is the writer's not the reader's, nor should they be present in the summary.

Accordingly, summarising a text for academic purposes would involve acknowledging, on the one hand, the limits imposed by the writer's topic (what is being talked about), and, on the other, those aspects implicit in the text which should be inferred or assumed. Such a view requires the development of a stable criterium that makes the process of summary writing plausible and reliable. In this sense, Brown and Yule's notion of 'topic framework' offers both the flexibility and systematicity we are looking for. For them «a characterization [of topic] can be developed in terms of a topic framework» consisting of «those aspects of the context which are directly reflected in the text» (1983: 75). The elements contained in the topic framework would be «derivable from the physical context and from the discourse domain of any discourse fragment» and interest would be in «only those elements which are *activated*, that is, relevant to the interpretation of what is said» (1983: 79) (their italics). This is an essential point for the completion of the notion of topic of discourse, for it covers the situational constituents of the textual unit: local, temporal, aspectual, etc., which conform the external and internal context of the text (de Beaugrande, 1980; de Beaugrande and Dressler, 1981). It is also helpful in shaping the bridge we have been wanting to build between the notions of macrostructure, topic and summary.

Taking this into account, any summary should consist of the following basic constituents (in this or a different order): 1) The contextual situation (physical context); 2) the writer's topic[s] (what the writer says); 3) the text internal meaning (what is being said about the topic and how it is organized *hierarchically*); 4) the text internal situation (if different from the physical external context). The identification of these constituents should suffice to make the method operative for both the production and evaluation phases. Perhaps the easiest task is the characterization of the contextual situation or topic framework, be it external or internal to the text, or both. This information is inferrable from the different situational references (e.g. time and place), whether direct or indirect; and also from the concepts activated by the lexical and/or structural choices, very especially those which open a semantic frame that is sustained throughout the text. More complexity involves identifying the writer's topic and distinguishing the text internal meaning from all those (personal) additions that may have occurred to the reader during the reading process. Here is where semantic analysis proves helpful.

3. THE METHOD: SEMATIC DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

To begin with students should be taught to approach every text as a complex, procedural unit, where different constituents (linguistic, psychological,

and contextual) interact. The only source of information the student has to recognize those constituents which are relevant for the act of summarising is the study of the verbal text itself. Therefore, knowledge of the cohesive devices and the coherent structure that conform the text is a priority. Of course, a thorough study of these two textual components can be highly complex. There is no need, however, to deal with the subject exhaustively. Understanding the way in which intersentential relations are built in English and identifying the main entities and markers would be enough to satisfy our purposes.

Based on Halliday and Hassan's extensive work on cohesion (1976), R. de Beaugrande and Dressler (1981) develop a comprehensive list of cohesive devices that could serve as a basis to analyse the surface text. These are *recurrence* (total and partial), *definiteness*, *co-reference* (anaphora, cataphora, exophora), *ellipsis*, and *(con)junction*. Of all these devices, recurrence (of the topic) has a special significance for the identification of the global discursive topic, and much emphasis should be placed on its recognition. Within the sentence, the topic role is easy to identify, especially if we oppose it to the concept of comment (see, among others, van Dijk, 1977, 1980; Halliday, 1985; Haviland and Clark, 1974). Distinguishing between these two semantic concepts is made even easier if the direct relation they have with the syntactic categories of subject (topic) and predicate (comment) is taken into account (see Hockett, 1958: 201). When teaching these notions, special attention should be given to clarifying what «topic» and «comment» mean *semantically*, for, in conversational usage, we all tend to use the word «topic» in a much more general sense implying both «the idea under discussion» and «what is being said about it». In linguistic analysis «the idea under discussion» is «topic», and «what is being said about it» is «comment».

Once these notions have been fully understood, students must be instructed to list or simply underline all the different (or coincident) topics (grammatical subject) they find in the various sentences of the text. Then they will have to focus on all those sentential topics which are either identical (repetition of the same word), or close in meaning (a word that partially recovers the meaning of a previous one or is a synonym). The more recurrent a sentential topic is, the more chances there will be for it to play a leading role in the global textual structure, and, consequently, the more important its place in the production of the summary will be. It is here where the concept of the hierarchical organization of the text starts to be relevant. There are two indices which help measure the (global) scope of a topic, in other words, the (top) position it occupies in the semantic structure of discourse. One of these is the order of frequency which has already been discussed, and the other is whether it also occupies the prominent semantic position of (discursive) theme.

Students should be instructed to identify as «theme», what Brown and Yule call «the left-most constituent» (1983: 126) of the sentence, that is to say, the first element in the sentence with syntactic autonomy, be it a simple sentence constituent or a whole subordinate clause, if the sentence is complex. Again they should list them or underline them. The importance of this action lies in the fact that, as Traugott and Pratt say, «the order of words in the surface structure communicates a different emphasis or perspective being adopted by the speaker. The first element in surface structure functions as the “point of departure” of the message» (1980: 283). Therefore, the choice of thematic position for a particular linguistic unit reveals an intention on the part of the text producer, as a way to focus attention on that item, even if it is not essentially what is being talked about (Halliday, 1985: 278). However, a difference must be established between the roles of discursive and sentential theme. What a producer chooses to open his/her text with will be (relatively) dominant over the rest of the unit, because it will establish the point of departure for the global message (van Dijk, 1980: 42). When the topic and theme hierarchies coincide, when the most recurrent topic occupies initial (and other) thematic position(s) in discourse, the probabilities of its being the topic of discourse are much greater. Students should then be told to contrast their topic and theme lists. The more recurrent entity in both will become the topic of their summary.

As for the comment category, its role at sentential level will develop into a whole body of meaning («what is said about the topic») at discourse level; it will actually constitute «the text internal meaning» (van de Velde, 92: 206). This method of text analysis should provide a series of systematic strategies facilitating the writing of a sufficiently accurate summary for all those who had been exposed to it.

4. AN EXAMPLE

In order to test the method, I will discuss a number of summaries of the initial fragment of Penelope Lively's *Moon Tiger* written by forty-seven undergraduate Spanish students of English (4th year). This specific text was chosen because it is short and simple enough to permit complete transparency of the operations involved in the summarising activity. The simplicity of the text makes all decisions, additions, and personal opinions self-evident and easy to control, although, I have to admit, it limits the applications of any findings. However, for the initial presentation of this method I consider clarity more important than complexity. In a future article I will demonstrate that the method works equally well with longer pieces.

Previous to the discussion of the summaries, I will analyse the text briefly in the terms described above. The first time a topic appears it will be fol-

lowed by a number in brackets, every recurrence of the same topic will be marked with the same number. Themes will be italicized. When theme and topic coincide both indications will be combined. In the analysis T will stand for topic, TFW for topic-framework.

4.1. *The Moon Tiger text*

«I (1) “m writing a history of the world”, she (1) says. *And* the hands of the nurse (2) arrested for a moment; she (2) looks down at this old woman, this old ill woman. “*Well, my goodness*”, the nurse (2) says. That (3) “s quite a thing to be doing, isn’t it?” *And then she* (2) becomes busy again, she (2) heaves and tucks and smooths-“*Upsy a bit, dear*, that (1)’s a good girl - *then* we (2)’ll get you a cup of tea.

When the notations are considered, it is evident that topics (1) and (2) dominate the passage. In terms of frequency T(2) is more prominent than T(1); (T(2) appears six times; (vs. T(1) three times). However, its initial position in the text makes T(1) the theme and point of departure for the whole discursive unit. It is, therefore, a top element in the hierarchical organization of the information, and reference to it is sustained all along the text («this old woman», «this old ill woman», «dear», «a good girl», «you»). On the contrary, T(2) never occupies a thematic position, at sentence level (it does at clause level). The first time it is introduced (second sentence), the theme is the additive conjunct *AND*, which semantically links the contents of this sentence to the previous one (where T(1) is theme and topic). Besides «the nurse», which will be the actual referential entity for all subsequent recurrences of T(2), is not exactly a primary concept in this first appearance. It is instead a secondary concept in relation of possession to the head of the phrase which is «the hands» («the hands of the nurse»). All points considered, T(1) seems to be a more prominent candidate for the role of discourse topic. Nevertheless, the fact that T(2) is more recurrent, turns it into a second possible candidate.

The «history of the world» concept, although recovered in the text as T(3), will be considered here as comment on T(1) which is the first role it plays, its second role being just an extension of the first. T(2) has as comment either T(1) (e.g. «she looks down “at this old woman”») or activities which are componential parts of its own semantic domain (nurse→cares for [‘heaves’, ‘tucks’...] ill people).

As for the activated topic framework, we could talk of two. One is given by the very topic entities: nurse / old ill woman, which open the «hospital» (nurse) and/or «illness» (old ill woman) frame. All the secondary concepts in the text (heaves, tucks, smooth, upsy, good girl, we, cup of tea) are semanti-

cally related to this framework. The other is opened by the conversation acting between the two entities, which holds for textual cohesion and coherence, and activates the «personal relation» TFW where three phases can be distinguished: T(1)'s words, T(2)'s reaction, T(2)'s words.

According to this analysis, and to the notions discussed above, a hypothetical summary of this text ought to contain the following elements: the «old ill woman» (T(1) and initial theme), the «nurse» (T(2)) and the comments on both, plus the TFW «relation» between them (activated framework through dialogical interaction). The TFW hospital / illness is already contained in the lexical items chosen for the topic entities (old *ill* woman / *nurse*) so –for reasons of economy as expected in a summary writing activity– there is no need for an explicit mention of it. But were it mentioned it would not be considered an addition. The order in which these elements have been listed presupposes a certain hierarchy: Thematic T(1) has preference over non-thematic additional (*And...*) T(2). The TFW (hospital/conversation) develops around both topics (1 and 2) and therefore will not be seen in a hierarchical relation to either of them. To allow for some creative flexibility (Brown and Yule, 1983; Fløttum, 1985) all three elements could be initially accepted as topic candidates.

4.2. *The Moon Tiger summaries*

I will discuss now 47 summaries written by 4th year University students of English as a FL, their average knowledge of the language equivalent to pre-Proficiency as demonstrated in their performance on University examinations. The experiment was carried out in an English as an FL class which all subjects attended together. 30 of these students (from here on Group A), however, had previously received 20 hours training in semantic text analysis, which included, among other exercises, the practice of summary writing, following the method explained here. The other 17 (from here on GROUP B) had not been exposed to my classes. The students were each given a copy of the *Moon Tiger* text and were told they had 30 minutes maximum to elaborate a summary of that piece. The only additional instruction was that they were to begin their summaries with the phrase «it is about...». This would serve as a way to control (in the analysis of the summaries) which element in the text they had chosen as primary topic. No other instructions were given. The presence of all three elements: T(1), T(2), and TFW, was considered necessary and marked correct. Additions that were not directly activated by the text and part of the TFW, personal opinions, and misreadings were marked wrong. This is the distribution of the results (see appendix for the reproduction of all the summaries):

GROUP A (30 summaries)

Of the 30 students who had taken the semantic analysis course, 10 chose T(1) as primary topic (from here on A1); 8 chose T(2) (from here on A2); 9 chose the TFW (from here on A3); 1 chose the construction phrase «two women», thus combining Ts(1) and (2) (from here on A4). The remaining summaries (A5, A6) chose an altogether different topic from the candidates foreseen in my previous analysis. The criterion used for the evaluation will be how each option recovered the different constituents: T(1) + comment, T(2) + comment; TFW (three phases). For the identification of the summaries in the appendix, each summary has been given a number that follows the group label.

A1 (T(1) as primary topic)

This group proved to be the most regular and successful:

- 5 summaries out of 10 (A1.1/2/4/5/9) recovered all elements.
- 5 out of 10 (A1.3/6/7/8/10) did not recover the second phase of the TFW (element of surprise/reaction implicit in the nurse's exclamative answer).
 - One of them (A1.8) also failed to recover the comment on T(2), and the first phase of the TFW (T(1)'s initial turn in the conversation).
 - No additions (personal opinions and/or misinterpretations) were found. Van Dijk's macrorules were used freely: deletion rule [the irrelevant information is dropped (e.g. «cup of tea»)]; generalization rule (more abstract terms are used instead of the more specific (e.g. «takes care» instead of «heaves, tucks...»)); construction rule (the global (e.g. «duties») subsumes the local («heaves, tuck...», «cup of tea...»)); and finally the zero rule (reproduction of the essential (e.g. «history of the world»)).

A2 (T(2) as primary topic)

The 8 summaries in this group presented considerable differences:

- Only 1 summary out of 8 (A2.6) contained all the components that were being controlled, as opposed to the 6 summaries in group A1.
- All summaries, in general, recovered comment on T(2) with more detail (e.g., 4 summaries (A2.1/2/3/8) mention that the nurse offered the lady something to drink, a piece of information that was absent from all summaries in A1).

All summaries but 1 (A2.6) failed to recover comment on T(1) («write a history of the world»).

- The TFW (conversation/relationship) was represented less regularly than in A1: 2 summaries (A2.2/3) do not mention it at all; 3 (A2.4/5/7) mention only the nurse's turn in the conversation. Only 2 of them (A2.1/6) include the nurse's reaction element (exclamation/surprise).

- 1 summary (A2.5) explicitly mentions the hospital TFW.
- The only traits that were sustained in all 8 summaries were T(2) + comment, and T(1).

From these data we can deduce that choosing T(2) (high in frequency but not thematic) as primary topic is not necessarily bound to be incorrect (A2.6). However, because the writer's perspective is altered (the combination of theme+topic is disregarded) there is a higher risk of faulty representation of the information, with loss of some essential informative units [e.g. comment on T(1)], and unnecessary expansion of others (e.g. detailed reproduction of nurse's duties). The macrorules were used, but sometimes not as efficiently as they were in group A1 (e.g. no construction rule in A2.1: «[the nurse] becomes busy again, puts her bed in order and promises a cup of tea»). There were no additions.

A3 (TFW as primary topic)

9 summaries chose the TFW (conversation/relationship) as primary topic. All in all their results were better than those obtained in A2 (with T(2) as primary topic); but it proved again less efficient than group A1 (where T(1) was selected).

- 3 out of the 9 summaries (A3.2/3/5) recovered all aspects.
- 6 summaries (A3.1/4/6/7/8/9) failed to mention one or more phases of the TFW.
- 5 summaries (A3.1/4/7/8/9) missed comment on T(1).
- 2 summaries (A3.1/7) missed comment on T(2).
- The macrorules were used regularly in all cases.
- There were no additions.

A4 (Ts(1) &(2) as primary topic).

– 1 summary chose to use a construction rule and present as primary topic a combination of T(1) and T(2): «two women». Here the TFW was recovered only partially (nurse's end), all other elements were recovered. Van Dijk's rules were used.

- There were no additions.

A5 (Personal opinion)

– 1 summary chose as primary topic an element which was not actually present in the text: «indifference». There was no direct evidence in the text to support the choice. The information from the text was misrepresented: there was no actual recovery of T(1) and T(2), these and all other elements were converted into generic concepts («patients in hospitals», «nurses») by using a generalization macrorule.

– There were additions («indifference», «mere objects», pluralization of all items).

A6 (Misreading).

– 1 summary selected «the history of the world» component as primary topic and attributed it to T(2) («The history of the world for this nurse...»). Most of the information (T(1), TFW) was not recovered, and the generalization rule was again mis-used to convert the specific into generic («to please people»). There were additions (e.g. «as simple as»).

Conclusions for Group A.

From the analysis of the data we can deduce the following: First, the combination initial theme/topic (A1) -when they coincide, as happens in this text- offers the highest guarantee to obtain complete recovery of the original information in the summary. Second, choosing the most frequent topic (A2) or the topic framework (A3) as primary topic is also a valid criterium, but the stability of the information has to be carefully maintained and well balanced (e.g. a primary topic cannot be forgotten, or treated as secondary...). The third issue that must be taken into account is that choosing as primary topic for the summary an element which is not part of the original (A5) gives way to misrepresentation of the information and to the appearance of additions (personal opinions, misinterpretations). Finally, when the hierarchical organization of the structure of the text is disregarded (A6), the occurrence of additions, misinterpretations and mistakes is again high.

Considered globally, the results are as follows: 28 out of the 30 summaries contained no additions, 9 of them recovered all the elements singled out in my previous analysis, and therefore would be marked as totally correct; 19 were partially correct, and the corresponding grading would be in inverse proportion to the position occupied in the textual organization by the element missing: the lower its position (e.g. TFW phase), the higher the mark given. Only 2 of the summaries failed completely. The method has indeed proved successful in the sense that it has served as model for the elaboration of the summaries, and as criterium for their evaluation, thus permitting a systematic approach to the practice.

Group B (17 summaries)

Of the 17 students who had not taken the semantic discourse analysis course, 4 chose T(1) as primary topic (from here on B1); 8 chose T(2) (from here on B2); 4 chose the TFW (from here on B3); 1 chose the construction phrase «two women» (from here on B4). Choices of primary topic are therefore basically similar to those of group A, with the difference that frequency

of appearance (T(2)) was evidently preferred over thematic topic (T(1)) an TFW. There were two traits, however, which made summaries in Group B strikingly different from summaries in Group A: It was their length (an average of 93 words in Group B against 40 in Group A), and the generalized use of additions, misreadings and personal opinions. These characteristics automatically make them less than adequate as summaries (many of them were longer than the original!) where economy and objectivity are essential. Here is a brief analysis:

B1 (T(1) as primary topic).

– 3 summaries out of 4 (B1.1/3/4) recovered all elements, that is to say T(1)+comment, T(2)+comment, and TFW (3 phases). All of them but one (B1.3) contained additions of the personal opinion type (e.g. B1.1 «She [T(1)] intends to be useful»; B1.4 «perhaps the nurse is tired of listening to things like this old woman's idea...»). B1.3 recovered all elements and had no additions, but it did not observe the economy principle (91 words).

– 1 summary (B1.2) recovered just T(1)+comment, and dealt extensively with it (114 words). It contained additions of the personal opinion/interpretation type (e.g. «knocking on the door of Death», «this idea could be understood if we find a metaphorical sense in the text...»).

– 1 summary (B1.4) also recovered explicitly the hospital TFW.

– Van Dijk's rules were partially used: only deletion and zero rules were frequent. The generalization and construction rules were not efficiently used and hence the lack of economy.

B2 [T(2) as primary topic]

– 1 summary out of 8 (B2.8) recovered all elements, though with some additions of the personal opinion kind (e.g. «perhaps that is what the old woman wanted»).

– 3 summaries (B2.1/5/6) did not recover the TFW and all of them contained additions, again personal opinion (e.g. B2.1 «crazy... maybe she is not so crazy... makes me think that she is... the more I read the text... an asyly...»; B2.5 «This is a typical case of non-latin countries...»), and also misreading (B2.6 «She [T(2)] mixes the wish to write with the wish to do something more practica... she identifies totally with her... the old woman would say to her "that's a good girl"»).

– 4 summaries (B2.2/3/4/7) partially registered the TFW, and 3 of them contained additions: B2.2 and B2.4 misreadings (B2.2 «the old woman is a passive charactes... she doesn't speak; B2.4 «the nurse does all the talking. She wants to break the silence...»). Additions in B2.3 were personal opinions («suffering from a disease impossible to cure... a silly and senseless topic... in my opinion... at your age and in your state you're crazy»).

- 1 summary (B2.3) explicitly mentioned the hospital TFW.
- As for van Dijk's macrorules what was said for B1 also applies here.

B3 (TFW as primary topic)

- 1 summary (B3.1) recovered all elements, contained no additions and broadly respected the economy principle (49 words).
- 2 summaries (B3.2/4) recovered all elements, but contained additions of the personal opinion type (e.g. B3.2 «mental diseases... clear delirium... reward for the fortunate patient...»; B3.4 «the old woman wants to be treated like a person, not like something there in bed, and the nurse seems not to notice it... or perhaps she does notice it, but she doesn't want to spend her time talking to the other woman...»).
- 1 summary (B3.3) recovered the TFW partially and contained additions, again personal opinion («it's a mental problem... she [T(1)] is suggesting that she is doing something impossible...»). This summary also mentions the hospital TFW.
- Only 1 summary (B3.1) used van Dijk's rules fairly efficiently.

B4 (T(1) & T(2) as primary topic)

- 1 summary chose this combination as primary topic. It recovered all elements in the original, but it also contained personal-opinion additions («communication is not real... as if she [T(1)] were not very clever...» «[T(2)] is thinking about the human condition: the decay of old age»).

Conclusions for Group B

The global results of Group B present a much more complex view. Only 1 summary (B3.1) in all 17 could actually be marked right. B1.3 could also be considered to respond to expectations but its length would make it inadequate. The rest, even if they recovered all elements either totally or partially did not conform to the summary pattern. The individual and subjective component present in all of them makes the evaluation difficult and asystematic. If we go by the notions mentioned above, all additions should be marked wrong, and the grading would also be difficult to systematize given the many variations these additions bring into the texts (in some a mere phrase, in others whole lines of text). The evaluating task would thus become burdensome and subjective, precisely the two components we were trying to avoid in the first place.

GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

We have to conclude therefore that the use of a theoretical and systematic method valid both for the elaboration and the evaluation of summaries

is desirable and adequate. We have shown how the method we propose based on semantic discourse analysis covers both objectives and proves efficient. It offers a way to improve the results of summary writing in general by following a set of systematic rules. On the other hand, it simplifies the evaluation process and makes it more objective because the grading decisions are based on controllable data, which is also a benefit for students who will thus have easier access to the evaluating criteria.

APPENDIX

GROUP A (30 summaries).

A1. Old lady as primary topic.

A1.1. It is about an old ill lady who surprises the nurse who is taking care of her when she says that she is writing a history of the world. But the nurse doesn't pay much attention to the old lady (40w.).

A1.2. The text is about an old ill woman and a nurse. While the nurse is making the woman's bed, the old woman tells her that she is writing a history of the world. The nurse, surprised at first, gives her a polite answer, and goes on with her duties (49w.).

A1.3. It is about an old woman who is speaking with a nurse, while the nurse makes her bed more comfortable. This old woman tells the nurse that she is writing a history of the world and the nurse says things to make her feel important for what she is doing (50w.).

A1.4. It is about an old woman and her nurse. The old woman says something strange: «I am writing a history of the world». And the nurse doesn't pay too much attention to her. She goes on with her work. She is kind but not attentive (45w.).

A1.5. It is about an old woman who says that she is writing a history of the world. A nurse who is there stops working for a minute. Then the nurse tells the old woman that what she is doing is quite an important thing. And the nurse goes on with her work (52w.).

A1.6. It is about an old ill woman who tells her nurse that she wants to write a history of the world. The nurse answers that it is a good thing, but she is busy and doesn't make much of what the old woman said (44w.).

A1.7. It is about an old ill woman and a nurse who takes care of her. The old woman tries to talk about her work—she is writing a history of the world—, but the nurse only makes a small comment and goes on working (44w.).

A1.8. It is about an old ill woman who wants to write a history of the world. The nurse answers quite carelessly: she doesn't pay much attention to what the old woman has just said (34w.).

A1.9. It is about an old woman who tells the nurse who is taking care of her that she is writing a history of the world. This nurse stops for a moment and, after looking at the old woman, goes on with her duty as if the most trivial thing in the world had happened (54w.).

A1.10. It is about an old woman who wants to write a history of the world, and who is not taken very seriously by the nurse who takes care of her (30w.).

A2 Nurse as primary topic.

A2.1. It is about a nurse who is looking after an old ill woman. This woman says something and the nurse stops. Then she becomes busy again, puts her bed in order and promises her a cup of tea (38w.).

A2.2. It is about a nurse who is taking care of an old woman. This woman is in bed, so the nurse has to help her. When the woman is comfortable, the nurse gives her something to drink (37w.).

A2.3. It is about a nurse who is taking care of an old ill woman, making her bed and preparing some tea for her (23w.).

A2.4. It is about a nurse who is taking care of an old ill woman. The nurse is talking to her while she makes her bed. The nurse speaks very kindly to the old woman (34w.).

A2.5. It is about a nurse who is talking to one of her old patients in hospital. She is very kind and treats her as if she were a little girl (30w.).

A2.6. It is about a nurse who is taking care of an old ill woman. This woman says that she is going to write a history of the world. This makes the nurse stop and comment on it, but then she goes on with her duty (45w.).

A2.7. It is about a nurse. She is taking care of an old ill woman who is in bed. The nurse makes the woman feel comfortable, helping her and talking to her (31w.).

A2.8. It is about a nurse and an old ill lady. The nurse does her job and doesn't seem to pay much attention to what the old lady says to her. The nurse treats the old lady in a childish and familiar way. She offers the old lady a cup of tea (51w.).

A3. Conversation/relation as primary topic.

A3.1. It is about the relationship between a nurse and an old woman who is ill, and the tenderness and amiability there is in it (24w.).

A3.2. It is a short dialogue between a nurse and a patient. The patient is an old woman who says she is writing a history of the world. The nurse simply looks at her, makes some comments and goes on with her work (42w.).

A3.3. It is about a short conversation between a nurse and an old woman she is taking care of. This woman tells the nurse she is writing a history of the world. The nurse says that it is an important thing to do and goes

on with her duties. The nurse tells the woman that they would get her a cup of tea (62w.).

A3.4. It is about the relationship between an old ill woman and the nurse who looks after her. While the nurse does her duty, the old woman shares her worries with her (31w.).

A3.5. It is about a conversation between an old ill woman and her nurse. The old woman says she is writing a history of the world. The nurse stops for a moment as if she were very surprised. Then she goes on with her work and talks as if nothing important had happened (52w.).

A3.6. It is about the relationship between an old ill woman and the nurse that looks after her. In spite of her age, the woman intends to write a book and the nurse seems to patronize her (36w.).

A3.7. It is about a conversation between a patient and a nurse. But the nurse doesn't seem to be very interested in what she hears. For the nurse it is not a real conversation (33w.).

A3.8. It is about a conversation between an old ill lady and the nurse who takes care of her. It shows how the nurse helps the lady as much as she can but she doesn't pay much attention to the worries the lady may have (44w.).

A3.9. It is about a conversation between a nurse and an old woman. The nurse pays some attention to what the woman says and then keeps on working (27w.).

A4. Two women as primary topic

A4.1. It is about two women. The old one is writing a history of the world, she is ill and in bed. A nurse looks after her. This nurse is very nice to her, especially when she talks to her (39w.).

A5. Personal Opinion

A5.1. It is about the indifference with which patients are usually treated in hospitals. Nurses pay attention to their own work caring little about their patients human side, considering them as mere objects with whom they deal in their duties (39w.).

A6. Misreading

1. The history of the world for this nurse is something as simple as to help and to please people who are unable to do things by themselves (27w.).

GROUP B (17 summaries)

B1. Old lady as primary topic

B1.1. It is about an old woman who is in bed because of an illness. Although she is ill she wants to take part in the world. So she decides to write a

history of the world, she intends to be useful. There is another character: the nurse. The nurse is doing her work, and though the old woman wants to speak to her about her idea, the nurse shows certain indifference towards her for two reasons: she is working and she is not really worried about the old woman, or perhaps the nurse is tired of listening to things like this old woman's idea. She doesn't pay attention to her (110w.).

B1.2. It is about an ill old woman who feels as if she were knocking on the door of Death. And perhaps this is the reason why she has the notion to write a history of the world. No she has already begun writing it. This idea could be understood if we find a metaphorical sense in the text. That is, «the world» is the old woman's own world, her own life. Everyone knows his own life best, and for everyone the world consists of all they have lived and known. And, of course, it would be impossible for anyone to write his memoirs if they were not written at the end of his life (114w.).

B1.3. It is about a woman who is writing something, and she tells it to the nurse who is taking care of her. The woman is said to be old and ill, and the nurse is not described at all. The text includes a piece of dialogue when the woman tells the nurse about her task: a history of the world. The nurse's reaction is to stop, a little surprised, to exclaim and to consider the woman's work as «quite a thing to be doing». Then she continues with her frantic work (91w.).

B1.4. It is about an old lady who is in hospital. She may be about to die and she is talking to a nurse. «I'm writing a history of the world», she says. Yet the nurse stopped for a moment what she was doing and then went on. She seemed not to pay attention to what the old lady was saying. Perhaps the old lady wanted to write not a «history of the world», but rather her own story, an autobiography, taking into account all the important events in her life, so that she didn't lose her enthusiasm, although she was dying soon (102w.).

B2. Nurse as primary topic.

B2.1. It is about a nurse who is taking care of an old crazy woman, maybe she is not so crazy, who knows? But the way in which the nurse treats her makes me think that she is. It could be that the nurse is so ignorant that she can't understand her patient. This is what I think the more I read the text.// I think the text takes place in an asylum and for some reason the old woman has been sent there (83w.).

B2.2. It is about a nurse who is looking after an old woman this old woman is in bed because she is ill. The nurse speaks to her and tells her that she is writing a history of the world.// The nurse is the only person who speaks. The old woman is a passive character: she is in bed and she doesn't speak. The nurse is looking after the old woman, makes her bed and speaks to her (77w.).

B2.3. It is about a nurse who is making the bed of an old ill woman (maybe in hospital or in the woman's house). The old woman looks as if she were really ill, suffering from a disease impossible to cure. She starts conversing about a silly and senseless topic: she is writing «a history of the world». In my opinion, the nurse hardly pays any attention to her, and, after saying something like «that's a good idea to keep busy and entertained» she keeps doing her tasks, treating the old lady like a young girl or a child. The nurse promises her a cup of tea, as if she were pretending to ignore what the old lady has told her, as if she were saying: «at your age, or in your state, you are crazy» (135w.).

B2.4. It is about a nurse as she is busy around a patient's bed. The nurse does all the talking. She wants to break the silence, and uses the expression «Well my goodness», empty of meaning but with a nice sound.// She does not expect any answer from the other person or at least not a long and complex one, but by using the question tag she succeeds in giving the impression that the other person is involved in the conversation, even if she does not speak.// The kind of language that the old lady uses to talk to the old woman is like the language you would use to talk to a child (113w.).

B2.5. It is about a woman who is trying to help another one in need. In this case an old woman. She wants the old woman to be a little comfortable and the the old woman thanks her. // This is a typical case in non-Latin countries where nobody in the family takes care of parents when they can't survive for themselves. They go to homes for old people or special hospitals.// In our country old people come to live with us till the end of their lives. Nevertheless we realise that something is changing and we can see some cases in which we act like people from the northern countries. Special residences are used for the old. The new generations look at them as something useless that nobody wants at home. That is a pity (134w.).

B2.6. It is about the reflections a nurse has while she is caring for an old woman. She mixes the wish to write with the wish to do something more practical. She answers the old woman's questions, and identifies totally with her because she believes that the old woman would say to her: «that's a good girl», and that, in order to maintain their relationship, she will invite her to a cup of tea (73w.).

B2.7. It is about a nurse who is doing his daily work. First of all she spends time talking to this old ill woman. The nurse considers this task of great importance. She says to her: «well, my goodness», as if she were saying that this is the most important thing I have to do, to stop my activity and look at you with all my attention and interest (68w.).

B2.8. It is about a nurse who is talking to a patient. This patient is an old woman, although the nurse treats her as if she were a little girl. She says she is writing a history of the world, and at that moment the nurse stops

working, and pays attention to her patient. Perhaps this is what the old woman wanted. Then the nurse goes on with her work (69w.).

B3. Conversation as primary topic

B3.1. It is about a conversation between a nurse and an old woman. First of all the old woman tells the nurse that she is writing a history of the world, and the nurse is a bit amazed. But later the nurse congratulates her and goes on with her task.

B3.2. It is about a scene in a hospital (clue: «nurse»), maybe a hospital for mental diseases. The patient, an old woman says in clear delirium: «I'm writing a history of the world». The nurse pretends to be surprised, and then goes on with her daily task. A cup of tea and perhaps a bit of love or sympathy is the reward for the fortunate patient. The nurse's answer ranges between irony and affection (73w.).

B3.3. It is about a conversation between a nurse and her old patient while the nurse is making the bed. We must underline the nurse's pleasant mood, and the charming way in which she talks to the woman. On the other hand the woman is ill, but not physically, it is a mental problem. So when she says «I'm writing a history of the world», she is suggesting that she is doing something impossible. The nurse doesn't even think about what she has said, and her answer is just a brief comment (91w.).

B3.4. It is about the short conversation between a nurse and her patient, an old woman lying in bed. The nurse stops doing her work for a while, exchanges some words with the patient, but she starts her work again. The old woman wants to share what she is doing with her nurse, she wants some conversation, wants to be treated like a person, not like something there in bed, and the nurse seems not to notice it, because she says some words about what the old woman has said and then continues with her work. Or perhaps she does notice it, but she doesn't want to spend her time talking to the old woman (114w.).

B4. Two persons as primary topic

It is about two persons: a nurse and an old woman. The nurse looks after the old woman with a lot of care and love, but I think that, in spite of that, the communication is not real. The nurse doesn't care much about the old woman's thoughts and treats her as if she were not very clever. Perhaps the nurse -when she stops for a moment and looks at this old woman- is thinking about the human condition: the decay of old age (84w.).

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