

WHO SHOULD WE TEACH ABSTRACTING TO?: EXPERIENCES IN HUNGARY WITH UNIVERSAL INFERENCES

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Abstracting continues to be an important activity even in the era of computers (Pinto Molina, 1992).

As Max Waters (1982) says «the ability to prepare useful abstracts from voluminous data does not transfer naturally from existing language instruction». A slightly different aspect of this is expressed by Brigitte Endres-Niggemeyer (1995), who points out that public codified knowledge about abstracting is meager.

This means that abstracting has to be thoroughly taught. The ideas below have been born mainly analyzing the situation in Hungary but the consequences are drawn with the intention to be of universal scope.

WHERE IS ABSTRACTING TAUGHT?

The importance of abstracting is recognized in documentation education, where abstracts' types and function are discussed. In this context in Hungary abstracting itself is taught mostly together with indexing. This education unfortunately often lacks of a more practical approach and the writing process does not get enough attention. There is almost no regular education beyond basic education in library schools and the possibilities seem to be behind those in Spain, not speaking about Anglo-Saxon education (Pinto Molina, 1992).

In addition to this, there are no textbooks of indexing and abstracting comparable to those written for English-speaking librarians as that of Donald and Ana Cleveland or of F. Wilfrid Lancaster, or of Jennifer Rowley. An extensive monograph dealing exclusively with abstracting, as María Pinto Molina's book would be even more needed.

We find abstracting included in a number of Technical Writing (TW) textbooks. TW is a class especially often taught in American higher education. It can be defined «as writing about a technical subject, intended to convey specific information to specific audience for specific purpose.» (Markel, 1988). It is important to

see that TW is not confined to engineering subject, it is «technical» in the above broad meaning.

TW literature shows, that many Technical Writing courses include the problems of abstracting. This is right even if many aspects of technical writing get appropriate attention, while minor tasks, like abstracting are often neglected, as it is expressed by Vaughan (1992).

In Hungary there is no integrated course in technical writing, but its elements can be found in different professional writing courses. It can only be hoped, that the importance of writing will be recognized more and more and technical writing will find its appropriate place in the now changing higher education.

This gap is partially covered by the existence of Professional Documentation (PD), a course designed to make students of translation acquainted with those written genres of linguistic (interlingual) mediation, that are not translation, but which a translator may be required to write. With this PD corresponds to the above definition of TW.

At the Technical University of Budapest (TUB) the state examination, which concludes the education of technical translators includes abstract writing, where an abstract of a technical article in English has to be prepared in Hungarian. Alongside with deeper theoretical reasoning this is the main reason why abstracting plays an important role in PD.

Unfortunately, these classes are restricted to two universities. Beside TUB PD is taught to students of English translation at Gödöllő University of Agricultural Sciences, as well.

There is one more restriction: even though at TUB the covered languages are beside English German, French and Russian, the education is only a class for students of translation.

The question arises why abstracting should go beyond the borders of documentation education and the education of translators.

To answer this question we have to examine the nature of abstracting.

In a very general context «Abstracting may be defined as the process of eliminating unnecessary detail to reveal underlying order, structure or some other characteristic that is so obvious as to be overlooked.» (Root-Bernstein 85). This understanding differs of ours only in its second part, as «some other characteristic that is so obvious as to be overlooked» is no more the domain of abstracting as we generally regard it in documentation. Still, it is hardly questionable that the word «abstracting» is closely related to «abstraction».

Learning abstracting fosters student's thinking to be concentrated on the notion of the importance of information, namely they have to decide, what is really important in a text and what is not.

As Dorothy Guinn (1979) puts it, abstracting not only employs decoding and encoding, develops critical reading skills, but it enhances the understanding of basic rhetorical principles. As some texts are not perfect, students will inevitably discover flawed patterns.

It is hardly disputable either, that writing abstracts promotes careful reading, summarizing, and synthesizing information (Curtis and Bernhardt, 1992).

Abstracts help to overcome language barriers (Borko and Bernier, 1975) and learning abstracting *refuerza solidamente el proceso de adquisición de lenguas* (Sanz-Sainz, 1991).

What indicates all this? Abstracting could be made integral part of academic life. As Sanz Sainz (1991) points out, abstracting is useful «*a todas aquellas personas que, para cualquier labor de su vida académica (presentación de conferencias, artículos, etc.) se ven la necesidad de confeccionar resúmenes*».

IMPORTANT ASPECTS OF TEACHING ABSTRACTING

GENERAL

It initiates thinking if we examine the following short passage, taken from the Career Guide of Lynne Neufeld and Martha Cornog: Abstracting is a series of small challenges: not two are alike, yet the writing must be consistent, accurate and finished on time. The abstractor should also enjoy the challenge of reducing the work to its essentials. A creative, detective-like skill is needed to find the main points in a wordy, badly written article. This has to be told to the students.

Even though it sounds very theoretical, a similarly practical feature of abstracting is that it is reasonable to assume, that abstractors comprehend the text the same way as fluent readers, but they work under time constraints, comprehend the text solely for the purpose of abstracting, the comprehension is directly followed by text production (Farrow, 1991).

TERMINOLOGY

If English terminology is involved the existing confusion about the differences between abstracts and summaries has to be cleared. The American Standard puts it clear: «A summary is a brief restatement within a document (usually at the end) of its salient findings and conclusions and is intended to complete the orientation of the reader who has studied the preceding text. Because other vital portions of the document (for example, purpose or methodology) are not usually condensed into this type of summary, the term should not be used synonymously with «abstract»; i.e. an abstract as defined above should not be called summary.» (ANSI 7).

Similarly terminological problems have to be cleared in Hungarian and supposedly in a number of languages. Notable example of this is the almost synonymous German use of «Abstracting (Abstract)» and «Referat (Referieren)». (Ruda)

Nonetheless terminology does not need to be overemphasized and the main attention has to be given to the writing process.

Students have to understand the objectivity of the abstract. They would easily recognize, that the abstractor is bound to avoid comments of his own: with comments the abstract becomes a kind of review (Collison, 1971). Namely, an abstract should not be confused with a review, which in its turn briefly describes the content of a text, but it also expresses the reviewer's opinion (Locker, 1982).

THE ABSTRACTING PROCESS

It is similarly easy to get acquainted with the steps a good abstractor has to take and comparisons to translation help a great deal.

After the first reading, which has the same function as in translation i.e. thorough understanding of the whole, subsequent readings are very much different in abstracting. As Robert Collison (1971) points out, it is almost inevitable, that many parts of the article will be ignored and the abstractor's attention will be concentrated on previously underlined or marked otherwise passages. Or, as Jennifer Rowley (1989) says, a practiced abstractor does not «read» every word in a document, but scans a significant part of it.

The process itself, continued by writing the first draft, checking the draft against the original, rewriting the first draft, checking and editing the final abstract (Rowley, 1989; Taylor, 1984) should be not only a theoretical notion, but has to be the backbone of the practical exercises, that are included in students' activities.

INFORMATIVE ABSTRACTS

Special attention should be given to the problem of differentiating between indicative and informative abstracts and the existence of a mixed (indicative-informative type).

Certainly students have to know, that all types of abstracts serve useful purposes, although the most popular and probably most important one is the informative (Cleveland and Cleveland, 1990).

Informative and indicative abstracts perform different functions and normally an article that lends itself to one form is not suitable for the another (Collison, 1971).

The informative abstract is most frequently used for journal articles describing single themes of experimental work (Cleveland and Cleveland, 1990; Rowley, 1989).

It is not however suitable for essays, bibliographies, surveys, curriculum studies, textbooks, discursive, philosophic papers, catalogues, symposia, complete books theoretical studies, opinion papers in the social sciences and humanities, reviews, broad overviews etc. (Collison, 1971; Lancaster, 1991).

Informative abstracts might act as a reasonable substitutes for the reading of the document, when a superficial or outline knowledge of document content is satisfactory (Rowley, 1989; Lancaster, 1991).

All this certainly presupposes, that the students have been made familiar with the functions, abstracts may be required to fulfill.

Informative abstracts are generally lengthier than the indicative ones (Rowley, 1989) and it is as well important to know, that indicative abstracts always contain some kind (often implicit) reference to the original (Kuhlen, 1984). This means, that the informative abstract is formed in a way, that it is hardly different from an original text, if we disregard the identification of the source, the (eventual) signature/initials of the abstractor, etc., which show the secondary nature of the abstract. In the words of Dorothy Guinn (1979), the informative abstract concentrates on what the original says, retaining in condensed form the inherent thinking of the original.

It is not difficult to understand for the students, that indicative-informative abstracts are more common than the pure types. Parts of the abstract are written in informative style, aspects of minor significance are treated indicatively. When used to good effect it can achieve the maximum information in minimum length (Rowley, 1989).

Practice has to concentrate on writing informative abstracts as they are much more difficult to produce than indicative ones (Manning, 1990; Roberts, 1982; Roundy, 1982; Lancaster, 1991).

It is important to stress, as well, that many different abstracts can be derived from one original (Rowley, 1989).

OBJECTIVITY

In this regard executive summaries take a different place. They not only lack of the description of methodology, but their tone will be often persuasive (Vaughan, 1992). As executive summaries have an important role in proposals and reports, they are included in the program.

Students thus should know that there are different understandings of the word «abstract». They see that at a congress an abstract is required before a paper is accepted. They have to know that this is a pre-text («unfinished», «promissory») text, that will be elaborated into a full text (Gläser, 1995). They meet author-abstracts, that is abstracts prepared by the author of the original. They see them as abstracts published together with the original scientific article or as executive summaries placed in proposals and reports.

STRUCTURE

Students have to know, that most documents contain background information as well as descriptions of well-known techniques, equipment, processes and results, that have to be omitted in the abstract (ANSI 9). and that a typical scientific article shows a structure, that answers to one of the varieties of the following: Introduction – Methods – Results – Discussion – Conclusions (IMRD/IMRC) scheme. They have to know, that this is less typical in the case of social sciences and humanities, popular science articles, magazine articles, etc. This structure then serves as a basis for the abstract's structure.

AUTHOR ABSTRACTS

Attention of the students should be directed to the fact that they have to be critical with author abstracts, as their quality differs greatly (Cleveland and Cleveland, 1990; Rowley, 1989). Certainly there can be good author abstracts, but abstractors should not rely on them as the only source of information. This is easy to understand in practice.

RULES FOR ABSTRACTING

Endres-Niggemeyer speaks about a toolbox of 453 abstracting strategies and 36 working processes derived from a naturalistic modeling of abstracting. (Endres-Niggemeyer, Mayer and Sigel, 1990). Her rule-based approach is usable education first of all because of the following.

We understand text by summarizing, that is a controlled forgetting. This means inferring then further integrating higher level macropropositions from propositions at the microlevel. The result of the comprehension process is a well-organized text base in the memory of the reader. For this macrorules are applied. These allow less important information to be dropped from memory during the reading and analyzing process. Deletion allows the reader to select textual details that can be forgotten with impunity. Generalization is substituting a sequence of propositions by a preposition that is entailed by each of the propositions in the sequence. Construction replaces a sequence of propositions by a preposition that is entailed by the joint set of the propositions in the sequence.

Summaries produced in the process of text comprehension may at a certain point correspond to an informative abstract.

There are many traditional rules of abstracting that can be further developed, systematized and combined with the macrorules as this is done by Endres-Niggemeyer (1990).

A selection from this set of rules can be given to the students. Such a selection is meaningful, if the rules have a meaning in circumstances of both interlingual and intralingual abstracting and are not difficult to interpret for the students. Some of these are «commonplace» rules that can be found in many abstracting instructions and technical writing textbooks. Nonetheless, repetition in this case is useful.

Thus, the following rules can be of the best use:

Ponga el resultado, elimine como se obtiene

Elimine ejemplos, definiciones, explicaciones

No use gráficos, ni tablas

No utilice referencias.

Omita lo que el autor juzgue menos importante

Elimine el obvio

Omita argumentos marginales

Sea positivo

Stick to facts, drop sentiments.

No repita lo que de algún modo esté contenido en la definición de un concepto

No lo diga dos veces

Omita embellecimientos retóricos

Defina el concepto central si fuera necesario para su comprensión

Si un acrónimo no es común, especifíquelo

Use terminología normalizada

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