The role of textual and lexical signals in paragraphError! Bookmark not defined. recognition: implications for teaching paragraph writing [1]

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RESUMO: Este estudo analisa o papel do parágrafo como unidade gramatical assim como a interação de fatores formais, lexicais e textuais na sua identificação. Cento e vinte alunos de graduação foram divididos em três grupos: 40 alunos eram do curso de Tradução tendo o espanhol como língua materna e o inglês como segunda língua (G1); 40 eram alunos do curso de Filologia tendo também o espanhol como língua materna e o inglês como segunda língua (G2) e os últimos 40 eram do curso de Tradução tendo o catalão como língua materna (G3). Foi-lhes pedido que reconstruíssem a paragrafação de um texto original (onde os parágrafos foram removidos) e a sua tradução, levando em consideração a língua materna, o elemento formal, lexical e textual como fatores que poderiam influenciar na identificação dos parágrafos. Os resultados do estudo confirmaram a noção do parágrafo como unidade gramatical. Também mostraram que é difícil determinar qual dos diferentes fatores influencia na demarcação. O estudo sugere uma reconsideração no ensino do parágrafo.

1. Introduction

The term 'paragraph' has received much attention in the literature, but most research has been concerned with how one should segment the text into paragraphs (Reid, 1985; Bowman & Branchaw, 1988; Arnaudet & Barret, 1990; Cook, 1991; Peck, 1991, Timbal Duclaux, 1993; Serafini, 1996) rather than describing how paragraphs are really written. This prescriptive approach towards paragraph writing has led researchers to define the paragraph by its unity, coherence and emphasis. This involves considering that a written text is divided into paragraphs which contain a topic sentence and some subtopics. It is also claimed that the topic sentence may take place at the beginning (stating the main idea), in the middle (linking two ideas) or at the end (as a conclusion). Paragraphs are also seen as being composed of semantic relationships such as cause-effect, comparison and contrast, generalization and example, problem solving etc. As far as the orthographic signals are concerned one would have little difficulty in agreeing that indentation indicates the beginning of a paragraph and its end is indicated by a full stop.

Several of the above mentioned features of paragraph writing have been criticized by those who analyze the paragraph from a descriptive point of view. The paragraph is claimed to be a grammatical unit (Young & Becker, 1966; Bond & Hayes, 1984) and a psychological unity (Koen, Becker & Young, 1959), but not a logical unit (Stern, 1976). This means that the notion of topic sentence and the orthographic signals cannot be taken as the only basic characteristics for identifying paragraph boundaries. Paragraph boundaries are thought to be determined by different factors. On the one hand, Rodgers (1966) identifies length, readers' expectations, readability, rhythm, parallelisms, juxtapositions and 'tonal fluctuations' (Chafe, 1994:297) as factors which may influence paragraph boundaries. On the other hand, coherence is another factor to consider in the identification of paragraph boundaries (Christensen, 1965 and Winterowd, 1970). Palmer (Forthcoming), following a macroestructural analysis of a

text, claims that the use of different types of texts might imply different notions of the term 'paragraph'. Finally, the unity and coherence of the paragraph may be differently organized across the writer's culture (El-Shiyab, 1994), since it is the writer who decides to extend "a dense cluster of cohesive ties across the paragraph boundary and leave the texture within the paragraph relatively loose" (Halliday and Hasan, 1976: 297). These factors, in turn, may be associated with the reader's capacity for processing information (Nystrand, 1986:77).

As illustrated in the literature, the reasons for establishing a paragraph boundary are complex and the results of research on paragraph boundaries do not support the notion of topic sentence as the only factor to consider in dividing the text into paragraphs (Hoey 1983, forthcoming). According to Hoey, paragraphing is a marker of relationship between blocks of information which may be marked by the choice of certain lexical items. In line with Hoey's research, we will examine the notion of paragraph as a grammatical unit where rhetorical pattern and lexical choices may influence the identification of paragraph boundaries. The study also focuses on the influence of first and second language on the identification of paragraph boundaries and its implications for teaching paragraph writing.

2. Research design

2.1 Participants

One hundred and twenty undergraduate students participated in this study. They came from three different groups: 40 came from the translation degree whose first language (L1) was Spanish and their second language (L2) English (G1). The second group (G2) was formed by English Philology students whose L1 was Spanish and L2 English. Finally, the 40 students in the third group (G3) have Catalan as their L1. The learners' level of English was not statistically different as shown by an entry test held at the beginning of the year.

2.2 Material design and procedure

We took the same passage (see Appendix, text 1, *Lincoln and His Generals* by T. Harry Williams) as that used by Young and Becker (1966) and Hoey (forthcoming) in their experiments. We removed the paragraph boundary markers. In text 2 (see Appendix) we also eliminated the spaces in line 19 as follows:

19   indicate that he had little aptitude for grant planning. As a theatre

20   strategist, Lee often demonstrated more brilliance and apparent

The break between lines 28 and 29 was also deleted, as follows:

28   a Southern general, he would have fought as Lee did. Fundamentally

29   Grant was superior to Lee because in a modern total war

Finally, text 3 (see appendix) was translated into Catalan with the same lexical items that may contribute to the identification of paragraph boundaries.

Subjects in G1 were asked to reconstruct the paragraph decisions of the original writer for text I. Informants in G2 were asked to perform the same task with regard to text 2 and the group G3 had to decide the paragraph boundaries in text 3. As in Hoey's study, informants were given only five minutes to make their decisions. They were also informed that they could make as many breaks as they felt appropriate. Breaks were reduced to percentages for our analysis.

2.3 Analysis of results

Table I shows Hoey´s (forthcoming) results as well as the ones obtained in our three groups of informants:

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Table I. *Informants' judgements on paragraph boundaries*

Error! Bookmark not defined.	GH	G1	G2	G3
LINE	%	%	%	%
2	0	0	2,5	2,5
4	17	10	47,5	2,5
7	33	5	35	27,5
9	0	0	0	22,5
13	94	100	90	80
16	11	5	37,5	12,5
20 (19)	49	70	37,5	17,5
23	49	37,5	62,5	65
24	0	0	2,5	2,5
25	3	15	30	12,5
27	2	2,5	7,5	0
29 (28)	64	80	42,5	40
30	0	0	2,5	0
32A	20	22,5	30	25
32B	8	5	2,5	0

GH. Students from Hoey's Group whose L1 was English.
G1: Students from Translation degree whose L1 was Spanish and L2 English.
G2: Students from English Philology degree whose L1 was Spanish and L2 English.
G3: Students from Translation degree whose L1 was Catalan.

The results obtained in G1 support Hoey's investigation. Lines 13 (GH 94%, G1 100%), 20 (GH 49%, G1 70%), 23 (GH 49%, G1 37,5%) and 29 (GH 64%, G1 80%) are chosen by Hoey's informants and ours as junctures where a new paragraph might begin. These results suggest that the rhetorical pattern of the text is recognized by our informants, helping them to make their decisions on the position of paragraph boundaries. In other words, as suggested by Hoey (1986), paragraph boundaries mark relations between the parts of discourse.

Despite the compatible results we have just mentioned, we can also observe certain differences with regard to line 20, 23 and 29. As far as line 20 and 23 are concerned, while there is no difference for Hoey's informants (49%), in G1 line 20 (70%) is chosen more frequently than line 23 (37,5%) as a possible juncture. One explanation can be found in the formal signal (line 20, text 1) commonly associated with a paragraph boundary. L2 learners may not feel as confident as native speakers and consider any signal they can recognize as a paragraph boundary. This is corroborated by the results obtained in G2 and G3 in relation to line 20, 23, and 29. As we have previously indicated texts 2 and 3 was slightly modified by eliminating the space generated after the full stop at the end of the lines 19 and 28. This fact might explain why in G2 and G3 the informants' choice is reduced in line 20 (G2 37,5%, G3 17,5%) in favour of their choice for line 23 (G2 62,5%, G3 65%). This explanation may be corroborated by comparing the results of G1 and G2 with those obtained in G2 and G3. While X^2 testing of results shows that the difference in signalling paragraph boundaries is significant between G1 and G2 (X^2= 103.44; df = 81; P = 0.04.71), it is not significant with regard to G2 and G3 (X2 = 102.50; df = 81; P = 0.0536).

The lack of formal signals may also force L2 speakers to pay attention to the lexical item 'In war' 'En guerra' (line 23). It also breaks the parallelism between the set of explanation about Grant (lines 1-13) and the set of explanations about Lee (13-23), and changes the focus of attention from Lee to a generalization. In other words, our informants' judgements seem to be based on the information they obtain from the whole text. In this sense, and in line with Goldman et al. (1995), the comparison of the groups allows us to support the hypothesis of the paragraph as a marker of the relationship between blocks of information.

With regard to informants' choice in line 29, the results are largely compatible with those explained in relation to line 20. While Hoey's informants choice is 64%, G1's informants choice is greater (80%) due to the presence of the formal signal. When the formal signal is eliminated (text 2 and text 3) G2 and G3's informant judgements on the paragraph boundary in line 29 decrease (G2: 42,5% and G3: 40%)

Finally, as mentioned, line 13, introduced by a name (Lee) and changing the topic, is felt to be particularly felicitous as a potential paragraph boundary. This tendency to break in line 13 can be seen as the moment where the writer starts a parallelism between Grant (line 1) and Lee (line 13). The matrix organization, as suggested by Hoey (1979, 1983, 1988), Winter (1974, 1977, 1986) and Widdowson (1979) among others, allows us to provide an explanation of informants' judgements on paragraph boundaries at line 13, and the tendency to mark a new paragraph at line 29 and 20 and 23. It also explains the break at line 32A, as a kind of exemplification.

3. Discussion

The results of the study indicate that the paragraph is a grammatical unit whose function is to mark a relationship between blocks of information. We have also shown that textual and formal factors influence non-native speakers' identification of paragraph boundaries. We have also observed that certain lexical items seem to have a tendency to occur at the beginning of paragraphs and even the start of the text (Grant, Lee, In War...). In order to investigate whether, as Sinclair (1991), Renouf (1992) and Hoey (forthcoming) have suggested for English, there is an interrelationship of lexical and textual phenomenon in Catalan, we analyzed G3 judgements on paragraph boundaries with lexical and grammatical items signalling paragraph boundaries in Hoey's and in our corpus. Hoey used a computer corpus of Guardian features and written components of the British National Corpus. He generated concordance lists of the salient words and examined whether each sentence-initial instance was paragraph initial in the original text. Our corpus was made up of 1029 articles taken from

opinion articles in *Avui* [2]. A total of 5997 paragraphs with an average length of 7 sentences per paragraph were obtained. We also generated concordance lists of the salient words and examined whether each sentence initial instance in text 3 was paragraph initial in our corpus.

Names (Grant and Lee):
The data in relation to names are largely compatible with Hoey's data. It was found that 282 names appeared in paragraph initial position. In the passage used in this study there were three sentences beginning with names (line 1, 13, 16, 30). Of these the first one is paragraph initial by default, and the second one was chosen by 80% of the subjects. As far as line 16 is concerned, 15% of the subjects began a new paragraph there, although no textual support was provided. These data help to explain the influence exercised by names in signalling paragraph boundaries in the text used in this study, an influence that is also corroborated by the 59 instances of names that appear in initial position of the text in our corpus. Finally, the name in line 30 does not signal paragraph boundary due to its late position in the passage.

Personal Pronoun (*Ell*):
Ell is the item equivalent to he in Hoey's study. In our corpus *Ell* appears at the beginning of 33 sentences while only two of these begin a paragraph. This might explain why only one subject selected a paragraph boundary at line 2. However, the 27,5% of the subjects breaking at line 7 might also account for the hypothesis that the hierarchical organization of the text is used to identify paragraph boundaries. As far as line 9 is concerned, the catalan translation was 'com a' which will be commented on later.

Definite Article + Possessive adjective (*La seua*):
This item is equivalent to 'his' in Hoey's study. In our corpus *La seua* appears at the beginning of 54 sentences while only 6 of these begin a paragraph. Our informans' judgements on paragraph boundaries (2,5%) support the results found in our corpus.

***Com a* + Noun**:

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[2] *Avui* is a newspaper published in Barcelona and written in Catalan.

This structure is equivalent to 'As a...' in Hoey's study. In our corpus only 9 sentences begin 'com a...' followed by a human noun phrase describing a function or role (e.g. *com a professor, com a espectador*...) and 1 in 3 begins a paragraph. This might explain why only 22,5% of our subjects selected a paragraph boundary at line 9 and 17,5% begin a paragraph at lines 19-20. Our results does not support Hoey's in this instance. One reason could be the fact that we avoided the space at the end of line 19. Lexical choices to mark paragraph boundaries in English and Catalan might also account for this difference.

En + noun (*En guerra*):
The next item in the passage is *En guerra*, equivalent to 'In war' in the original passage. In our corpus the lexical item *En* + noun (*En política, En ciències*...) can be found in nine sentences in initial position, two were also paragraph initial. In the light of the instances in our corpus, it doesn't appear that the lexical items per se influence the start of a new paragraph, an idea that is corroborated when we analyze the structure *Si* + noun.

Haver de + infinitive (*Ha de...*):
The sentence beginning at line 24 was selected by only one informant as paragraph initial in our study and by nobody in Hoey's. In our corpus this imperative structure is found 74 times at the beginning of the sentence, of which 10 also begin paragraphs. We cannot anyway compare this structure with Hoey's study since its translation is 'it' functioning as a pronoun.

Si + name+ (subjunctive) Verb
The sentences beginning at line 25 and 27 are conditional sentences translated into Catalan as *si* + name + subjunctive verb. The data obtained in our corpus do not support Hoey's study. In our data there were eight instances of the structure *Si* + name at the beginning of a sentence, and of these six also begin a paragraph. From this ratio we may have expected our informants to begin a new paragraph at these lines. However, only 12% of our informants signal a paragraph boundary at line 25 and none of them do it so at line 27.

-ment (*Fonamentalment*):

A search in our corpus revealed no instances of *fonamentalment*. In order to enhance the data we found all the adjuncts in *ment* and examined which ones also began a new paragraph. In our corpus we found 387 examples in sentence initial position, 122 of which were also paragraph initial. These data support our informants' judgements on signalling paragraph boundaries (40% of our informants indicated the start of a new paragraph at line 28-29). The difference between Hoey's informants judgements (64%) can be explained by the elimination of the space in line 28 while Hoey starts the sentence in line 29.

Les + noun (*Les planes*):
On line 31 the next sentence begins with the noun phrase *Les planes* (This is not examined by Hoey, who analyzes the verb 'illustrate'). In our corpus we found 349 sentence initial instances, of which 92 are also paragraph initial. These results suggest that noun phrases are likely to be found in paragraph initial position. With regard to informants' judgements on paragraph boundaries, the 20% in Hoey's study and the 25% in ours could be explained by these results, that is to say, by a tendency to find noun phrases in paragraph initial position, although they are not restricted to such a position.

No + (subjunctive) V (*No seria*):
Our final sentence is equivalent to the sentence beginning with anticipatory 'it' in Hoey's study (line 32). As we have mentioned in *ha de* + inf, we can not compare our lexical item with anticipatory 'it', but we can say that 34 begin sentences of which 10 can be found at the beginning of the paragraph. The different functions and uses of 'it' in English and its translation into Catalan would require an analysis which is beyond the scope of this study.

In the light of the data obtained in our corpus, the influence of lexical items on paragraph boundaries should be considered in relation to textual and formal factors. We agree with Hoey (forthcoming) that paragraphing is a product of two interrelated phenomena: the hierarchical organization of the text and the choice of lexical items. However, in line with Rodgers (1986), our study supports the view that different factors should be

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considered before generalizing on the reasons that may influence paragraph boundaries.

4. Conclusions and implications for teaching paragraphs

In this paper we have examined the interaction of textual, lexical and formal factors in the identification of paragraph boundaries. We suggest that the paragraph signals relations between parts of discourse, rather than being a logical unit in its own right. The different factors that may influence paragraphing decisions appear to interrelate with one another in such a way that it is difficult to consider them separately. Care should be taken in generalizing the results of this study. We have focused our attention on the informants judgements on paragraph boundaries. Our analysis has mainly centred on the junctures chosen by our subjects as paragraph initial. The results of the study might also be considered in relation to the teaching of writing as a process.

Language learners are frequently instructed in paragraph writing based on the notion of the topic sentence (Reid and Lindstrom, 1985 and Arnaudet and Barrett, 1990). However, the results of this study suggest that the idea that each paragraph must develop a topic, which has dominated the prescriptive approach towards paragraph boundaries, should be reconsidered. On the one hand our results, in line with Hoey (1983, forthcoming), support the idea that the notion of paragraph as a logical unit with its unity coherence and emphasis is no longer universally valid. On the other hand, as McCarthy (1991) and McCarthy and Carter (1994) have suggested, analyzing natural occurring discourse can be useful for teachers and learners. From the teachers point of view, knowing how real writers divide a text into paragraphs can help him/her to analyze the naturalness of texts provided in textbooks. This can also help teachers to provide learners with tasks that are likely to encourage natural paragraph writing. From the learners' point of view, natural data promote awareness on paragraph writing. Providing learners with a text in which to evaluate the presence or absence of lexical, textual and formal features which the writer uses to divide the text may be a possible

way to become aware of the range of devices used in the process of writing.

This process of writing, in contrast to the teaching of writing as a product, is encouraged by those concerned with language teaching methodology (Hedge, 1988; White and Arndt, 1991; Silva, 1993 and Tribble 1996). The procedure in teaching writing as a process is to encourage and assist learners to concentrate on expressing themselves in the written mode. In so doing they are provided with opportunities in planning, developing and monitoring their own writings. With regard to paragraphing this would involve planning the three basic paragraph components (hierarchical structure, lexical choice and orthographic signals), verifying their presence in writing and evaluating their effect in relation to the information that can be obtained from natural data and the feedback provided by the teacher. Teachers should inform learners that a paragraph is a flexible, expressive and rhetorical instrument which learners can use to express certain topics rather than being concerned with the correct locations of the topic sentences. Paragraph teaching materials which take into account the research on text organization and the interactive process of writing are still needed.

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APPENDIX
(Text 1)

1.Grant was, judged by modern standards, the greatest general
2.of the Civil War. He was head and shoulders above any general on either
3.side as an over-all strategist, as a master of what in later wars
4.would be called global strategy. His Operation Crusher plan, the
5.product of a mind which had received little formal instruction in the
6.higher area of war, would have done credit to the most finished
7.student of a series of modern staff and command schools. He was a
8.brilliant theatre strategist, as evidenced by the Vicksburg campaign,
9.which was a classic field and siege operation. He was a better
10.than average tactician, althought, like even the best generals of
11.both sides, he did not appreciate the destruction that the increasing
12.firepower of modern armies could visit on troops advancing across
13.open spaces. Lee is usually ranked as the greatest
14.Civil War general, but this evaluation has been made without
15.placing Lee and Grant in the perspective of military
16.developments since the war. Lee was interested hardly at all
17.in 'global' strategy, and what few suggestions he did make to
18.his government about operations in other theatres than his own
19.indicate that he had little aptitude for grant planning.
20.As a theatre strategist, Lee often demonstrated more brilliance
21.and apparent originality than Grant, but his most audacious plans were
22.as much the product of the Confederacy's inferior military

23.position as of his own fine mind. In war, the weaker side
24.has to improvise brilliantly. It must strike quickly, daringly
25.and include a dangerous element of risk in its plans. Had Lee
26.been a Northern general with Northern resources behind him he would
27.have improvised less and seemed less bold. Had Grant been
28.a Southern general, he would have fought as Lee did.
29.Fundamentally Grant was superior to Lee because in a modern
30.total war he had a modern mind, and Lee did not. Lee
31.looked to the past in war as the Confederacy did in spirit.
32.The staffs of the two men illustrate their outlooks. It would
33.not be accurate to say that Lee's general staff were
34.glorifield clerks, but the statement would not be too wide
35.of the mark...

 (Text 2)
1.Grant was, judged by modern standards, the greatest general
2.of the Civil War. He was head and shoulders above any general on either
3.side as an over-all strategist, as a master of what in later wars
4.would be called global strategy. His Operation Crusher plan, the
5.product of a mind which had received little formal instruction in the
6.higher area of war, would have done credit to the most finished
7.student of a series of modern staff and command schools. He was a
8.brilliant theatre strategist, as evidenced by the Vicksburg campaign,
9.which was a classic field and siege operation. He was a better
10.than average tactician, although, like even the best generals of
11.both sides, he did not appreciate the destruction that the increasing
12.firepower of modern armies could visit on troops advancing across
13.open spaces. Lee is usually ranked as the greatest
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20.strategist, Lee often demonstrated more brilliance and apparent
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29.Grant was superior to Lee because in a modern total war
30.total war he had a modern mind, and Lee did not. Lee
31.looked to the past in war as the Confederacy did in spirit.
32.The staffs of the two men illustrate their outlooks. It would
33.not be accurate to say that Lee's general staff were
34.glorified clerks, but the statement would not be too wide

35.of the mark...

 (Text 3)
1.Grant fou, jutjat amb els paràmetres actuals, el més gran general
2.de la guerra civil. Ell fou molt superior a qualsevol altre general de qualsevol dels
3.dos bàndols com a estratega total, com a mestre del que en les guerres posteriors
4.es denominaria estratègia global. La seua planificació de l'Operació Crusher,
5.el producte d'una ment que havia rebut una minsa formació en
6.estudis militars superiors, haguera donat fama a l'alumne més reeixit
7.de qualsevol escola militar i de comandament. Ell fou un
8.brillant estratega de batalla, com s'evidencià en la campanya de Vicksburg,
9.que fou una operació clàssica de setge i de camp. Com a tàctic
10.fou millor que la majoria, encara que, com fins i tot els millors generals dels
11.dos bàndols, no apreciava la destrucció que la creixent
12.capacitat de foc de les armes modernes podia realitzar sobre les tropes avançant
13.a camp obert. Lee, normalment, es considerat com el més gran
14.general de la guerra civil, però aquesta valoració ha estat feta sense
15.situar Lee i Grant dins de la perspectiva dels desenvolupaments
16.militars esdevinguts des de la guerra. Lee no estava gens interessat
17.en l'estratègia global i els pocs suggeriments que féu al
18.seu govern sobre operacions en altres escenaris que no foren els seus
19.indicaven que tenia poca aptitud per als grans plans estratègics.Com a estratega
20.de batalla, Lee demostra sovint més brillantor i major originalitat
21.aparent que Grant, però els seus plans més audaços foren
22.molt més producte de la posició d'inferioritat militar de la
23.Confederació que de la seua ment subtil. En guerra, la part més dèbil
24.ha d'improvisar brillantment. Ha d'atacar ràpidament, agosarada
25.i incloure un perillós element de risc en els seus plans. Si Lee haguera
26.estat un general del Nord amb els recursos del Nord darrere seu
27.hauria improvisat menys i semblat menys arriscat. Si Grant haguera estat
28.un general del sud, hauria lluitat com ho féu Lee. Fonamentalment
29.Grant fou superior a Lee perquè en una guerra total moderna
30.tenia una ment moderna, i Lee no la tenia. Lee mirava cap al passat
31.en la guerra, com ho feia la Confederació en l'esperit. Les planes majors
32.dels dos hòmens il.lustraven les seues perspectives. No seria
33.exacte dir que la plana major del general Lee era un conjunt de
34.buròcrates glorificats, però l'afirmació no estaria molt lluny
35.de la realitat...

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