

Supra phrasal unity

Linguistics



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So a supra-phrasal unit may be defined as a combination of sentences presenting a structural and semantic unity backed up by rhythmic and melodic unity. Any SPU will lose its unity if it suffers breaking. But what are the principles on which the singling out of an SPU can be maintained? In order to give an answer to this question, it is first of all necessary to deepen our understanding of the term utterance. As a stylistic term the word 'utterance' must be expanded. Any utterance from a stylistic point of view will serve to denote a certain span of speech (language-in-action) in which we may observe coherence, interdependence of the elements, one definite idea, and last but not least, the purport of the writer. The purport is the aim that the writer sets before himself, which is to make the desired impact on the reader. So the aim of any utterance is a carefully thought-out impact.

Syntactical units are connected to achieve the desired effect and it is often by the manner they are connected that the desired effect is secured. Let us take the following paragraph for analysis:" 1. But a day or two later the doctor was not feeling well. 2. He had an internal malady that troubled him now and then, but he was used to it and disinclined' to talk about it. 3. When he had one of his attacks, he only wanted to be left alone. 4. His cabin was small and stuffy, so he settled himself on a long chair on deck and lay with his eyes closed. 5. Miss Reid was walking up and down to get the half hour's exercise she took morning and evening. 6. He thought that if he pretended to be asleep she would not disturb him. 7. But when she had passed him half a dozen times she stopped in front of him and stood quite still. 8. Though he kept his eyes closed he knew that she was looking at him." (Somerset

Maugham) This paragraph consists of eight sentences, all more or less independent. The first three sentences, however, show a considerable degree

of semantic interdependence. This can be inferred from the use of the following cluster of concepts associated with each other: 'not feeling well', 'internal malady', 'one of his attacks'. Each phrase is the key to the sentence in which it occurs. There are no formal connectives, the connection is made apparent by purely semantic means. These three sentences constitute an SPU built within the larger framework of the paragraph. The fourth sentence is semantically independent of the preceding three. It seems at first glance not to belong to the paragraph at all. The fact that the doctor's 'cabin was small and stuffy' and that 'he settled himself... on deck' does not seem to be necessarily connected with the thought expressed in the preceding SPU. But on a more careful analysis one can clearly see how all four sentences are actually interconnected. The linking sentence is 'he only wanted to be left alone'. So the words 'lay with his eyes closed' with which the fourth sentence ends, are semantically connected both with the idea of being left alone and with the idea expressed in the sentence: 'He thought that if he pretended to be asleep she would not disturb him.' But between this sentence and its semantic links 'lay with his eyes closed' and 'wanted to be left alone', the sentence about Miss Reid thrusts itself in. This is not irrelevant to the whole situation and to the purport of the writer, who leads us to understand that the doctor was disinclined to talk to anybody and probably to Miss Reid in particular. So the whole of the paragraph has therefore semantic and structural wholeness. It can, however, be split into two SPUs with a linking sentence between them. Sentence 5 can be regarded as an SPU, inasmuch as it enjoys considerable independence both semantically and structurally. Sentences 6, 7 and 8 are structurally and therefore semantically interwoven. But when and though in the seventh and eighth sentences are the structural

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elements which link all three sentences into one SPU. It follows then that an SPU can be embodied in a sentence if the sentence meets the requirements of this compositional unit. Most epigrams are SPUs from the point of view of their semantic unity, though they fail to meet the general structural requirement; viz. to be represented in a number of sentences. On the other hand, an SPU, though usually a component part of the paragraph, may occupy the whole of the paragraph. In this case we say that the SPU coincides with the paragraph. It is important to point out that this structural unit, in its particular way of arranging ideas, belongs almost exclusively to the belles-lettres style, though it may be met with to some extent in the publicistic style. Other styles, judging by their recognized leading features, do not require this mode of arranging the parts of an utterance except in rare cases which may be neglected. Let us take a passage from another piece of belles-lettres style, a paragraph from Aldington's "Death of a Hero." It is a paragraph easy to submit to stylistic and semantic analysis: it falls naturally into several SPUs.

1. After dinner they sat about and smoked.
2. George took his chair over to the open window and looked down on the lights and movement of Piccadilly.
3. The noise of the traffic was lulled by the height to a long continuous rumble.
4. The placards of the evening papers along the railings beside the Ritz were sensational and bellicose.
5. The party dropped the subject of a possible great war; after deciding that there wouldn't be one, there couldn't.
6. George, who had great faith in Mr. Bobbe's political acumen, glanced through his last article, and took great comfort from the fact that Bobbe said there wasn't going to be a war.
7. It was all a scare, a stock market ramp...
8. At that moment three or four people came in, more or less together, though they were in separate parties.
9. One of them was

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a youngish man in immaculate evening dress. 10. As he shook hands with his host, George heard him say rather excitedly, "I've just been dining with..."

Analysis of this paragraph will show how complicated the composition of belles-lettres syntactical units is. There is no doubt that there is a definite semantic unity in the paragraph. The main idea is the anxiety and uncertainty of English society before World War I as to whether there would be, or would not be, a war. But around this main sense axis there centre a number of utterances which present more or less independent spans of thought. Thus, we can easily single out the group of sentences which begins with the words 'After dinner' and ends with '... and bellicose' This part of the text presents, as it were, the background against which the purport of the author stands out more clearly, the last sentence of this SPU preparing the reader for the main idea of the paragraph—the possibility of war—which is embodied in the next supra-phrasal unit. This second SPU begins with the words 'The party " dropped the subject of a possible great war' and ends with '... a stock market ramp.' It is made structurally independent' by the introduction of elements of uttered represented speech (see p. 238), the contractions wouldn't, couldn't, wasn't, the purely colloquial syntactical design there wouldn't be one, there couldn't, the colloquial word scare. The shift to the third SPU is indicated by the dots after the word ramp () Here again it is the author who speaks, there are no further elements of represented speech, the shift being rather abrupt, because George's thoughts were interrupted by the entrance of the newcomers. The connecting 'At that moment' softens the abruptness. The author's purport grows apparent through the interrelation—an interrelation which seems to be organic—between the three SPUs: sensational and bellicose placards in

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the streets of London, the anxiety of the people at the party, the conviction backed up by such a reassuring argument as Mr. Bobbe's article that there was not going to be a war, and the new guests bringing unexpected news. SPUs are not always so easily discernible as they are in this paragraph from *The Death of a Hero*. Due to individual peculiarities in combining ideas into a graphical (and that means both syntactical and semantic) unity there may be considerable variety in the arrangement of SPUs and of paragraphs, ranging from what might be called clearly-marked borderlines between the supra-phrasal unit to almost imperceptible semantic shifts. Indeed, it is often from making a comparison between the beginning and the end of a paragraph that one can infer that it contains separate SPUs. It follows then that the paragraphs in the belles-lettres prose style do not necessarily possess the qualities of unity and coherence as is the case with paragraphs in other styles of speech and particularly in the scientific prose style. SPUs are to be found in particular in poetical style. Here the SPUs, as well as the paragraphs, are embodied in stanzas. Due to the most