Shared Identities: Our Interweaving Threads

Methods of simplification in a graded reader

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Despite increasing interest in extensive reading using graded readers (GRs) there is still some debate whether simplification deprives learners of experiencing natural language, and whether it creates less cohesive texts. This paper discusses an analysis of two texts: an excerpt from the original and a GR simplification of Dickens' *Great Expectations*. Both texts were analysed for readability, complexity, marked thematic structure, and cohesive ties. The GR was found to contain some simplified syntax, have higher readability scores due to shorter sentences, and contain less marked thematic structure. Despite containing a proportionally similar number of cohesive ties as the original, their use was significantly less sophisticated in the GR. The author suggests that most of the simplification is necessary to provide accessible reading material for learners and in this case does not result in a less cohesive and readable text.

Graded readersを用いてのextensive readingについての関心が高まっているが、簡素化された書籍を使用することについて論議が起っている。簡素化された書籍を使うことは、学習者が自然な言語を学ぶことや、結束生のあるテキストの創造を妨げていないのかという論議である。この論文はチャールズ・ディケンズの「大いなる遺産」の原文からの抜粋と簡素化されたgraded readersの2つの本文の分析から成り立っている。分析は可読性、複雑性、有標の主題構造、結束性の強さの観点から行った。短文の使用とより少ない有標の主題構造により、graded readersは簡素化された統語法、可読性の高さを含んでいる。しかし、原文と比べて同じだけの結束の強さを保持しているにもかかわらず、graded readersの使用は著しく単純化されている。本稿では、学習者が可読な読み物教材を提供するためには、簡素化のほとんどが必要であり、またこのケースは結束性が弱く可読性の少ないテキストを生み出すものではないということを提案している。

As extensive reading becomes increasingly popular, there is an ever increasing number of graded readers (GRs) for learners. Despite a significant body of research suggesting that extensive reading using such material can have a variety of beneficial effects, there is still an ongoing debate whether these simplified texts or other authentic texts should be used (Crossley, Louwerse, McCarthy, & McNamara, 2007; Young, 1999).

Proponents of using authentic texts have argued that simplification prevents learners from being able to experience natural language (Long & Ross, 1993). Honeyfield (1978) proposed that in its effort to reduce syntactic complexity, simplification actually leads to less cohesive and less readable texts.

Simensen (1987), in a survey of GRs, identified three kinds of simplification: the control of information (*abridgement and the inclusion of extra information*), control of language (*limiting vocabulary, simplifying syntax and avoiding archaisms*) and control of discourse (*unambiguous pronoun reference and sentence cohesion*). Publishers themselves show how readers are graded by headwords counts and grammatical structures. Young (1999) described how literary texts such as the one in this study are not actually simplified, but a simple account of the story is given instead.

This paper compares a chapter of Dickens' original *Great Expectations* with a GR, identifying and commenting on some of the methods of simplification used.

Methods of analysis

Two texts were analysed: the first chapter of the *Modern Library* edition of the original Great Expectations by Charles Dickens (2001), and the corresponding end point of the stage five *Oxford Bookworms* GR (West, 2000). I chose this title as it was one which some of my students have read and enjoyed. First, both excerpts were analysed locally for individual examples of direct simplification. The remainder of the analysis was more global and looked at complexity and readability, thematic structure and cohesive structure.

Complexity and readability

A software program, *Coh-Metrix* (McNamara, Louwerse, Cai, & Graesser, 2005), was used to calculate various readability measures. The verbal groups were also analysed for the use of voice.

Thematic structure

As Halliday and Matthiessen (2004) have described, in English *Theme* is realised by the element that is positioned at the beginning of the clause while the remainder is known as the *Rheme*. As Theme is at the beginning, it is typically realised by the subject. However, more unusual or *marked* Theme is also possible; in declarative clauses, circumstantial adjuncts, complements or predicators can act as Theme.

I used a T-unit as the basic unit of analysis which considers dependent clauses that follow the main clause as part of the Rheme. However, dependent clauses that precede the main clause were counted as part of the Theme, therefore adding a fourth possible type of marked Theme in my analysis.

The texts were examined for differences in their thematic structure and particularly the use of marked and unmarked Theme in declarative clauses.

Cohesion

Honeyfield (1978) expressed the concern that simplification may lead to less coherent texts as "the relationship of one piece of information to the next is often unclear" (p. 435). The two texts were analysed at the sentence level for their use of four types of cohesion identified by Halliday and Hasan

(1976) – conjunction (realised by conjunctive adjuncts), reference (personal, demonstrative and comparative), and substitution and ellipsis – to comment on their cohesiveness. Cohesive ties were counted to see if the GR had been stripped of these, and differences in use were also looked for.

Results and discussion

Local analysis

Table 1 below shows four examples of direct simplification in the GR. Example (1) sees the slang expression *hold your noise* being replaced with a more standard *Don't say a word*. Also, in the reporting clause, the author has changed *started up* to *jumped up*. Although the lexical item *start* is likely to appear in the vocabulary list for a 1800 word reader, perhaps in this sense it would not. (2) sees *begged* replacing *pleaded* perhaps because of a word list, or the author's intuition regarding their relative frequencies. (3) shows how the

Table 1. Examples of simplification in the GR

	Original	GR
(1)	"Hold your noise!" cried a terrible voice, as a man started up from among the graves…	"Don't say a word!" cried a terrible voice, as a man jumped up from among the graves…
(2)	"Oh! Don't cut my throat, sir!" I pleaded in terror.	"Oh! Don't cut my throat, sir!" I begged in terror.
(3)	"Tell us your name!" said the man. "Quick!"	"Tell me your name, boy! Quick!" he said…
(4)	"…that old Battery over yonder."	"…that wooden shelter over there,…"

author of the GR has dealt with Dickens' tendency to divide quoted speech with a reporting clause. In (4) the archaic or regional *over yonder* is substituted by *over there* and *Battery* is replaced with *wooden shelter*.

Complexity and readability

Readability

Scores for two common readability formulas can be seen in Table 2. The Flesch Reading Ease Score ranges from 0 to 100 with a higher score showing an easier text. The Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level formula is on a scale from 0 to 12, with difficulty indicated by a higher number. As expected, Table 2 clearly shows a significant difference between the original and the GR.

Both the above measures of complexity essentially show that word and/or sentence lengths are greater in the original and therefore the reader has to work harder to process the text. However, results from Coh-Metrix (Table 3) tell us that the mean number of syllables per word are similar for both texts, and the real difference is with the number of words per sentence.

Table 2. Traditional readability measures

	Flesch Reading Ease (0-100)	Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level (0-12)
Original	82.1	6.0
GR	92.8	2.9

Table 3. Coh-Metrix data for the two texts

	Original	GR
Number of words	1841	524
Number of sentences	117	51
Syllables per word	2.3	2.2
Mean number of words per sentence	15.7	10.3

Passive voice

A count of the number of passive voice clauses reveals an apparent method of simplification being used. In the original there were 17 examples of the passive but none in the GR. This is interesting as the Oxford Bookworms syllabus states that simple, continuous and modal passive forms can appear in a stage five title.

Thematic structure

Marked Theme

Table 4 shows that the prevalence of marked Theme is greater in the original text (32% of all T-units) than in the adaptation (13%).

Of the marked Theme in the GR, there are five declarative clauses consisting of one circumstantial adjunct (*when I was a small child)*, two complements, one predicator and one dependent clause (*If you don't, or if you tell anyone about me*).

Table 4. Marked Theme in the original and the GR

	Original	GR
Number of T-units	112	56
Number of marked Theme	36 (32% of total)	7 (13% of total)
Declarative	29	5
Adjunct	4	1
Complement	1	2
Predicator	13	1
Dependent clause	12	1

The original text contains 31 examples of marked Theme with four adjuncts (*At such a time*, *After each question*, *At the same time*, *On the edge of the river*), one complement and, interestingly, a comparatively large number of Theme realised by predicators and dependent clauses. The high number of predicators in the Theme position is due to the amount of quoted speech in the text and Dickens' tendency to have the predicator as Theme in the corresponding reporting clauses. Throughout the text there are 21 reporting clauses with 13 of these realised by a predicator as in (5) from the original:

(5)   said   the man.

Theme   **Rheme**

(6) shows the corresponding T-unit in the GR. As in all but one of the reporting clauses in the GR, the subject realises unmarked Theme:

(6)   he   said.

       Theme   **Rheme**

Perhaps the most striking difference is the 12 dependent clauses realising Theme in the original, compared with only one in the GR. (7) from the original may indicate why the author of the adaptation did not include them. This dependent clause Theme contains four clauses, two of which are elliptical and we would expect this to be extremely difficult for learners to process. This may have been one reason why it has been abridged in the GR.

(7) To five little stone lozenges, each about a foot and a half long, which were arranged in a neat row beside their grave, and were sacred to the memory of five little brothers of mine – gave up trying to get a living exceedingly early in that universal struggle –   I am indebted for a belief I religiously entertained that they had all been born on their backs with their hands in their trousers-pockets, and had never taken them out in this state of existence.

        Theme   **Rheme**

Discussion of dependent clauses as Theme leads to a question of complexity and nothing characterises this more than the marked T-unit in (8), which has a circumstantial adjunct (*At such a time*) realising Theme. It possesses an

incredibly complex Rheme and demonstrates how much information is pinned on a single Theme, something that cannot be found in the GR.

(8)

At such a time   I found out for certain, that this bleak place overgrown with nettles was the churchyard; and that Philip Pirrip, late of this parish, and also Georgiana wife of the above, were dead and buried; and that Alexander, Bartholomew, Abraham, Tobias, and Roger, infant children of the aforesaid, were also dead and buried; and that the dark flat wilderness beyond the churchyard, intersected with tykes and mounds and gates, with scattered cattle feeding on it, was the marshes; and that the low leaden line beyond was the river; and that the distant savage lair from which the wind was rushing, was the sea; and that the small bundle of shivers growing afraid of it all and beginning to cry, was Pip.

    Theme   **Rheme**

In the GR the information contained in (8) has been divided into the following sentence (9) containing three unmarked T-units without the thematic complexity:

(9)

Theme	Rheme
My parents	had died when I was a baby,
so I	could not remember them at all,
but, quite often, I	used to visit the churchyard, about a mile from the village, to look at the names on their gravestones.
Theme	**Rheme**

It appears that the author of the GR has decided, albeit perhaps subconsciously, that marked Theme are more difficult for learners to process and, if not completely avoided, should have their frequency limited and complexity curtailed.

Cohesion

Conjunction

56 conjunctives were found in the original text with 20 in the GR, appearing every 2.2 and 2.6 sentences respectively. The difference here is not significant so the GR appears to be cohesively rich with regard to conjunction.

Reference

As with conjunction there was little difference in the amount of reference ties in the two texts. However, a closer look shows the GR uses personal reference exclusively to refer to objects and people, and a deeper complexity can be found in the original. For example, the *it* in the final line of (10) arguably presupposes all of the preceding clauses in the extensive clause complex:

(10) At such a time I found out for certain, that this bleak place overgrown with nettles was the churchyard; and that Philip Pirrip, late of this parish, and also Georgiana wife of the above, were dead and buried; and that Alexander, Bartholomew, Abraham, Tobias, and Roger, infant children of the aforesaid, were also dead and buried; and that the dark flat wilderness beyond the churchyard…was the marshes; intersected with dykes and mounds and gates, with scattered cattle feeding on it, and that the low leaden line beyond was the river; and that the distant savage lair…was the sea; from which the wind was rushing, and that the small bundle of shivers growing afraid of **it** all and beginning to cry, was Pip.

Substitution and ellipsis

The most significant difference between the cohesive make up of the two texts in terms of quantity is with the use of substitution and ellipsis. Whereas the original text contains numerous examples of both substitution and ellipsis – nine and 19 respectively – the GR contains only two instances of ellipsis and one of substitution. Both cases of ellipsis are examples of responses to WH- questions where the whole clause has been ellipsed apart from the WH- element as in (11):

(11) "So where are your mother and father?" he asked.

"There, sir"

The sentence containing substitution is an example of *do* substituting a verbal group:

(12)   "I promise I'll **do** it, sir!"

The original contains several of these types of substitution and ellipsis as well as a variety of others. For example:

(13)   To five little stone lozenges, **each** about a foot and a half long…

(14)   "You get me a file." … "And you get me wittles." … "You bring 'em **both** to me."

The *each* in (13) presupposes *to five little stone lozenges* while in (14), *both* refers to the *file* and the *wittles*.

It seems that substitution and ellipsis ties are perhaps considered more challenging than other types of cohesion for learners.

Conclusion

The above analysis reveals some of the methods of simplification being used. The GR has been largely rewritten although sections seem to have been directly simplified lexically and structurally. Globally, the GR has shorter average word and sentence length which is reflected in traditional readability measurements. Closer analysis reveals it is the number of words per sentence that is responsible for this. This would seem reasonable to allow learners to process the text more easily.

This excerpt of the GR has had the passive voice omitted. If the structure is allowed for that level then why has it been cut? This raises the question – which Wanarom (2008) discussed with regards to wordlists – to what extent GR authors follow the structural syllabus of the publisher.

The thematic analysis revealed the tendency to use unmarked Theme in the GR and to pin less information on a single Theme. The cohesion analysis showed few significant differences in terms of the quantity of conjunction and reference ties, although the GR seems to have been stripped of the original's substitution and ellipsis ties. Also, as we might expect, the original shows more complexity in its use of cohesive ties.

Overall, the analysis does suggest that the methods of simplification produce a less natural language experience for learners. I would suggest, for example, that an intermediate learner reading a stage five GR would probably be familiar with passive voice and it could be argued that its absence takes away the opportunity for input.

Perhaps this and the uniform approach to thematic structure are the kinds of simplification that Long and Ross (1993) had reservations about. On the other hand, the GR remains cohesively rich and Honeyfield's (1978) fears about cohesion do not seem to have been realised.

While the debate between using authentic or simplified materials will no doubt continue, I feel that the loss of some authenticity is certainly justified to provide accessible and enjoyable extensive reading material for learners. I also consider it relevant to us language teachers that we appreciate some of the other – albeit subconscious – methods of simplification being applied to graded readers.

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