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Cornelia C. Paraskevas

Language as Choice: Exploring the Tools Writers Can Use

As a Way of Introduction

Snapshot 1:

During my 30 minute commute to work, I listen to the classical music station—not only do I enjoy the selection of music but, most importantly, the details about the piece and the composer that the announcer gives. About a month ago, the ‘composer of the day’ was Tchaikovsky whose music was perfect for the cloudy, drizzly early morning commute. In the interval between pieces, the announcer talked about Tchaikovsky’s composing process. One detail particularly struck me: Tchaikovsky, he said, had deep knowledge not only of music theory but also of the range of each instrument. He could adjust his compositions accordingly to accommodate the limitations of each instrument he was using, while, at the same time, maintaining his composing vision for the piece. This tidbit of information got me thinking about my students’ writing compositions: We expect them to have a vision in their pieces, to adjust the language appropriately, yet we rarely provide them with a deeper understanding about language, with real knowledge about the grammar/writing connection.

Snapshot 2:

A few weeks ago, my 14-year old daughter, Athena, came home with an interesting assignment: She had to create a winter story and include similes and metaphors as a way to provide vivid detail to the narrative, to make the story engaging. Since she is an exceptional reader, I asked her about her experiences with vivid language: “The writers you’ve been reading...how they add detail? How do they write so that you can feel you’re inside the text?” That line of questioning was not innocent; because I know that she reads a lot, I wanted to know what implicit knowledge about writing she has gained from the various texts she has seen and how she might use this knowledge for writing.

Her response to my question was exactly what I had expected, though she didn’t know the terms, she was able to give me examples of the various ways writers add detail. I suggested we also take a look at what a Language Arts textbook had regarding adding details; after all, throughout her years in school, I’ve been encouraging her to use her textbooks as resources for writing. This time, however, the resource failed us: the book listed a set of modifiers (adjectives, adverbs, prepositional phrases, adverb clauses), gave a very brief, not-quite-useful explanation (“modifiers make the meaning of a word or word group more specific”—Odell, Vacca, Hobbs, & Irvin, 2007, p. 531), provided simplistic examples (“The weather was good on the day of the match”—Odell et al., 2007, p. 536) and asked students to choose the correct modifier in a set of sentences. There was no discussion about the choices writers have when using modifiers,

what effects such choices have, nothing. The sole purpose was simply for students to know how to identify these constructions in a text. I see this as a typical example of grammar discussion completely separate from writing instruction or, as I call it, ‘grammar instruction as castor oil, horribly unsavory but good for you.’

That doesn’t have to be the case, however: There is close connection between knowledge about language (language awareness/grammar) and writing, one that is not remedial or unpalatable but one that encourages the writers’ creativity and choice.

In order to see that connection, we need to change the lens of coercion or correction that we’ve been wearing (and the students, as a result,

have been wearing) when looking at language. Typical Language Arts texts (Odell et al., 2007) ask us (and our students) to use this coercion/correction lens: “For each of

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the following sentences, write the kind of phrase that is called for in parentheses” (p. 418); “identify each prepositional phrase in the following sentences; [then] write the word each phrase modifies (p. 419);” “correct each of the following run on-sentences....” (p. 688); “choose the correct form of the pronoun in parentheses in each of the following sentences” (p. 697). This, however, is not the lens I want anyone to wear whenever engaging with language. I want everyone to put on the lens of choice, a lens evident by the questions we ask of a text and its writer: what has the writer done and how? What makes this text work and why? What strikes you in the language/sentences that the writer is using?

A First Look at Grammar as Choice: What Does It REALLY Mean?

In order to see the interdependence between grammar and writing, I want to focus on two elements that give us ‘maximum return’ for our time and energy investment, elements that can make a difference in student texts and in writers’ relationship with language, namely modifiers of nouns and sentence openers. These two text features seem to correlate with teachers’ complaints about students not including enough detail in their writing (modification) or with texts not flowing smoothly (sentence openers). There is an additional benefit, however, to focusing on these two elements: They both are important indicators of syntactic development and change: Both Haswell (2000) and Myhill (2009) have clearly shown that as writers

develop, we should expect significant change in elaboration of ideas (in other words, longer noun phrases) accomplished through increased use of modification; the second feature of syntactic complexity involves the ways writers negotiate/vary the opening elements of their sentences as a way to guide their reader. In what follows, we will first look in more detail at these two features, modifiers and openers, and then provide a pedagogical framework of instruction that clearly connects reading, knowledge about language and writing.

A closer look at modifiers

When I read a text, any text, I pay close attention to the detail writers provide for their nouns, the ‘show-not-tell’ descriptions that make a piece come alive, if it’s a narrative, or make

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it easier to understand if it’s expository. Now I know that my students have heard us repeatedly tell them to show not tell, but most don’t know the range of possible modifiers that exist in English nor do they have a variety of

tools to craft such texts. For example, as we saw earlier in the text, in a typical textbook on Language Arts, the discussion, if any, on adding details focuses on adjectives only ignoring the range of noun-modification possibilities English has to offer: prepositional phrases, relative clauses, appositives. Alternatively, as the opening snapshot reveals, we encourage students to make their writing more vivid by adding metaphors and similes to their texts, constructions which, while useful for creative writing, are rarely used in non-creative pieces.

My purpose here is to show the range of options for adding detail in non-fiction, expository pieces; after all, for most of my students, expository writing is ‘boring’, ‘non-creative,’ ‘straightjacketing.’ It surprises them when I tell them that doesn’t have to be the case, that non-narrative pieces can be as creative in their language, fluent in their sentence arrangement as fiction pieces. And this becomes my purpose in language instruction: to show my novice writers the options they have that will allow them to craft linguistically engaging non-narrative pieces with lots of show-not-tell detail.

A quick look at the following non-fiction texts easily shows the variation in modification that is possible for English, with premodifiers (that is modifiers preceding the noun they modify) indicated in bold and postmodifiers (that is modifiers following the noun they modify) underlined and/or italicized (in case of complex modifiers):

The **developmental psycholinguist** Peter Gordon has capitalized on this effect in an **ingenious** experiment that shows how **children’s** minds seem to be designed with the logic of word structure built in. (Pinker, 1994, p. 146)

A **distant** airplane, a delta wing out of nightmare,

made a **gliding** shadow on the creek’s bottom that looked like a stingray cruising upstream. (Dillard, 1974, p. 21)

The apple pie at the picnic that turned into laughter that grew into men that went their **separate** ways that found each other laughing over grandma’s apple pie that turned everybody into little boys again. (KitchenAid ad)

In the first text, for example, we find a variety of premodifiers (‘developmental psycholinguist’, ‘ingenious’ and ‘children’s’) and postmodifiers (‘that shows how children’s minds seem to be designed with the logic of word structure built in’): other nouns, adjectives, and that-clauses. The second text reveals yet another way of adding interesting detail to a noun—an appositive (renamer): ‘a delta wing out of nightmare.’ Finally, the third text playfully reminds us of the nursery rhyme ‘This is the house that Jack built’ by including multiple, recursive that-clauses (relative clauses).

There is an additional benefit to engaging in a discussion about modifiers: by showing students texts where the nouns are modified by pre- and postmodifiers, we help them begin to understand the structural differences between spoken and written texts since spoken language is marked by limited use of noun modifiers (15% only) whereas news and academic prose are marked by extensive use (60% of nouns have a modifier) (Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, & Finegan, 2009).

A Closer Look at Openers

Looking at sentence openers provides another opportunity for us to explore the various options language offers and to show students the choices they have. We frequently ask students to vary their openers in order to avoid sentences that are monotonous and ensure fluency, beginning the same way is boring, we tell them and rightfully so. However, they often are not aware of the range of possible choices for openers and the effects these choices have. For example, the difference between the following sentences, is due to the difference in openers which, in turn, causes a difference in focus.

Some articles I read in order to understand different ways of organizing a text.

I read some articles in order to understand different ways of organizing a text.

Specifically, in the first sentence, the opener ‘some articles’ indicates that focus is on ‘some articles,’ whereas in the second sentence, the focus is on the opener ‘I’ (Vande Kopple, 1991).

We can think of openers in another way: openers allow writers to guide the readers towards what is important for the text (Myhill, 2009). For instance, in the following short text, the writer has “violated one of the cardinal rules” and uses a coordinating conjunction as the opener of the second sentence:

“It is flattering to me that these three concepts have been used, adopted and adapted in many following

words. But sometimes I worry about how they are treated.” (Fries, 2009, p. 9)

There is a clear purpose to using ‘but’ as the opener: the writer wants us to pay attention to his concern, he wants to emphasize the contrast between being flattered and being concerned. The lens of error would not allow us to see this intent; the lens of choice however does.

In the following sentence, we see that the openers are carefully selected not only to provide the framework against which the sentence develops but also to guide our eyes from a wider to a narrower view (from the principal’s office to the desk and the bottle on it).

In the principal’s office, a fire inspector is waiting to discuss a recent fire. On the desk, as an exhibit, is a blackened bottle with a torn Budweiser label. The bottle is stuffed with paper that was soaked in kerosene. (Kozol, 1991, p. 140)

This brief discussion, then, has revealed the benefits of switching lenses—of looking at language as choice, thus establishing the connection between grammar, reading, and writing. In the next sections, we will look in more detail on how to look at texts with an eye towards the language decisions writers make.

Looking At Modifiers and Openers Through the Lens Of Choice—A Detailed Discussion

In this section, we will look in detail at how we can use the lens of choice as we examine modifiers and openers in various authentic, non-fiction texts. Specifically, in what follows, we present a step-by-step, pedagogical framework that draws on the interdependence between reading, writing and grammar.

Step I—Choosing Texts

The first step is to gather authentic texts of various genres, similar to the ones students read or close to the ones I want them to produce. This step is critical: my purpose in any language discussion is to show students that the constructions/text features we explore in class do in fact exist in the real world instead of the existing only in the English classroom world

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(the way the five-paragraph essay, for example, exists only in schools). Since I cannot always guarantee that my students will have access to non-school text—and I worry that they will not consider the daily, homely texts they might be reading as worthy of language study, I bring in the first texts—those that have surprised me because the writer has made an out-of-the-ordinary language move. My choices vary widely, from ads to longer texts (editorials, expository, recipes and

how-to instructions) drawn from various sources: magazines, journals and newspapers (ranging from Applesseeds to Sunset, the Oregon English Journal to CCCC, my local paper to the NYT)—and created by various writers (novice and accomplished, children and adult). In short, any text will do—as long as it is authentic. One additional consideration: it is important to use units of text larger than a sentence since isolated sentences cannot show us how effective a particular choice might be.

Step II – Looking At Modifiers and Openers Closely—In Three Phases (Noticing, Pondering, and Trying-It-Another Way)

The sections below provide a detailed look at modifiers and openers, respectively, providing specific examples and ‘how-to’, connecting reading and grammar instruction.

I. Modifiers: Noticing, Pondering and Trying

After gathering multiple texts, I invite students to look closer at the various ways the writers have provided us with specific detail (indicated in bold and, for multiple levels of detail, in italics and underlining, respectively):

Before packaged yeast and **factory-baked** bread, most **leavened** loaves were sourdough, **born of the interaction among flour, bacteria, and wild yeast floating in the air**. That mighty breadmaking combo, **called a starter**, has quite a history. In ancient Egypt, sourdough fed the workers **who built the pyramids at Giza**. Today, **home** bakers can use the Internet to order vintage starters **with distinctive tangs** from **sourdough** hotspots like San Francisco, Russia, and Australia. But **sourdough** bread does take time: A loaf **relying on a starter instead of commercial yeast** needs to rise at least 12 hours. That’s too long for many bakeries, **which now stir in enzymes and chemicals, called bread improvers, to speed up the process**.

(R. Williams, 2007, p.33)

Devices **that aid counting** have been around for thousands of years. About 5,000 years ago, the Mesopotamians recorded their calculations by sliding **small stones** along furrows in the ground—**an idea similar to the abacus which appeared later in China and Japan**.

(Davies, 1997, p. 72)

The typographical conventions—bold letters, underlining and italics—allow us to notice the sheer number of detail—of modifiers—in each text. But that is not enough: it is equally important to see the range of options—the tools—the writers have used to achieve that level of detail. Almost all the possible structures—adjectives, -ing or -ed verb forms, relative clauses, other nouns—appear in these short texts in both pre- and post-noun positions: **wild** yeast, **leavened** loaves, **wild** yeast **floating** in the air, workers **who** built the pyramids at Giza, **sourdough** bread.

It is also important to note that even though these texts are not academic, they still are characterized by the range of modifiers typical of academic writing. In fact, time spent exploring the detail-adding tools in multiple texts is time well spent, according to Biber, because “learning to understand and eventually to produce such structures is one of the main linguistic challenges that students encounter as...they learn to deal with written academic registers” (Biber et al., 2009, p.76).

The second phase, pondering, asks students to reflect on the choices the writer has made: “why do you think the writer made this particular choice?” I ask them. Frequently, they can’t answer. They’ve never been asked to speculate on a writer’s intent. In order to facilitate their task, then, I move to phase three (trying it another way) and ask them: “what happens if we eliminate all detail from the text?” “What happens to the text and our response/reaction to it, if the modifiers were gone?” Here is a ‘stripped’ version of the first text above:

Before yeast and bread, most loaves were sourdough. They were born of the interaction among flour, bacteria, and wild yeast. That combination has quite a history. In ancient Egypt, sourdough fed the workers. Today, bakers can use the internet to order starters. But bread does take time: a loaf needs to rise at least 12 hours. That’s too long for many bakeries, which now stir in enzymes and chemicals to speed up the process.

We can now compare the two versions: what do we lose by removing all detail? What, if anything, do we gain? (Dean, 2008) We can now see the writer’s thinking: the details were chosen for particular reasons, to create a text with specific information that could engage the readers but would also make the information accessible.

Often, students will comment that this short trying-it-another-way opens their eyes to the myth of “short sentences are better.” At the end of phase three, they have come to realize that carefully selected details make them appreciate the text more—even though it is significantly longer (116 vs. 74 words).

II. Sentence Openers: Noticing, Pondering and Trying

The opening part of the sentence is Janus-like: When filled by an expected choice, it goes unnoticed, but it draws our full attention if the writer has chosen to use an unexpected construction as the opener. The expected, typical, unsurprising, unnoticed (unmarked) opener of a sentence is the subject (underlined in the following text):

Bentgrass is the name of many related kinds of grasses that have rough stems, small flowers, and seeds that grow in delicate clusters. Bentgrasses are native to Europe and Asia and were introduced to the United States by early colonists.

Two kinds, creeping bentgrass and colonial bentgrass, are widely used for golf courses and lawns. Both are grown from seeds. Creeping bentgrass also

may be grown by planting tufts of the grass
(Johnson, 1992, p. 254)

There is nothing particularly exciting about these opener/They don’t grab our attention. Yet, they perform a very important function: they help connect each sentence to the one preceding, making sure in other words, that the text flows smoothly. In fact, the type of text, an encyclopedia, doesn’t require anything more from the openers except a clear sense of how they help create a smooth text.

It is often tempting to think that writers of all texts do not carefully choose what construction to place in that position. This, however, is far from the truth. Openers are extremely versatile: They can “serve as a point of departure for the further development of the discourse (Brown & Yule, 1985, p. 133), indicate “what the text is about,” (Brown & Yule, p. 132) or maintain a “tie” across sentences (Thompson, 2004; Vande Kopple, 1991), linking [the opener] to the previous discourse, maintaining a coherent point of view (Brown & Yule, p.133). In sum, openers, when carefully chosen, can make the readers’ job easier since they often reveal the logic of the paragraph, the way the writer has organized a particular paragraph.

In the following text, for example, we notice that most of the sentences don’t begin with the expected choice, the subject, but with other expressions (dependent adverbial clauses and adverbs) which emphasize the time-based (chronological) organization of the paragraph:

Milton sold his caramel company for \$1million—a huge amount of money in 1900—and began to really focus on chocolate. After he created a formula for mass-producing milk chocolate, Milton decided to build a new factory. Soon, he went home, back to Derry Township, where he had grown up. When he built his new factory there in 1905, his goal was to make chocolate bars everyone could afford.
(Woodruff, 2006, p. 20)

The variation in the openers of the sentences above is not random; rather, the writer begins the paragraph with a focus on Milton as a way to reorient the reader since this is the first sentence of the paragraph. The rest of the paragraph contains sentences that begin with time expressions, namely subordinate clauses and adverbs, focusing on the development and change-over-time of Hershey’s inventions.

So far, in our examination of openers, we have completed two phases—noticing the openers and pondering/reflecting on their function in the text above. We can deepen our understanding of the importance of openers by moving to the next phase—trying it another way. What would happen, for example, if we changed the openers in the paragraph above?

Milton sold his caramel company for \$1million—a huge amount of money in 1900—and began to really focus on chocolate. He decided to build a new factory after he created a formula for mass-producing milk chocolate. He soon went home, back to Derry Township, where he had grown up. His goal was to

make chocolate bars everyone could afford when he built his new factory there in 1905.

By changing the openers—and using the subject as the opener—we have not changed the core meaning of the paragraph yet we have made a significant change in its organization and focus. Now, the focus is on Milton himself and not on the change over time in his quest for developing affordable chocolate.

It is important to remember that English, despite its fixed word order, is fairly flexible in what can be a possible sentence opener. Conjunctions, prepositional phrases, adverbial expressions are among the options that the language gives us, the options we want to share with our students as they craft their work. The choice is theirs. We have just provided them with options they can consider and tools they can use.

Closing Thoughts on the New Lens

After looking at texts through the lens of choice, and going through the three phases, a number of my students—especially those who enjoy writing—express their absolute conviction that there is a close connection between grammar, reading and writing. As my student Dennis recently wrote, “careless instruction of grammar is punishment. But careful study of grammar, a conscious understanding of the stylistic choices that grammar can generate—this is opportunity.” And so, just like Tchaikovsky’s knowledge about music allowed him to make adjustments for instruments that didn’t have the range that fit his purposes for his piece, grammar knowledge allows students like Dennis (my college student) and Athena (my middle-school daughter) to see the range of options and opportunities they have for crafting language, as well as the adjustments they need to make for a particular effect, but only if they study texts with the lens of choice.

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The Writers Toolbox

Options for openers: Tools for guiding readers’ attention

The list below includes the various options available in English for sentence openers, with a brief explanation on the purpose of each choice.

Expected choice for opener

Subject

The dusty gravel track rolls across central New Mexico with little more than an occasional lost steer to break up the expanse of sparse vegetation and endless blue sky.

Unexpected choices for openers

Coordinating conjunction (to establish connection with preceding sentence)

But as the Chacoan population grew, the pine needles disappeared from the pack rat nests.

Conjunctive adverb

However, Walt Dean and Julio Betancourt caution that drought may not have been the only factor leading to the abandonment of Chaco Canyon.

Ving/Ven (participle)/infinitive clause (to create movement or establish relationships)

Looking down at the ruins of Pueblo Bonito from high on the sandstone cliffs of Chaco Canyon, I was reminded of a more modern view I had taken in recently: the waters of Lake Mead....

To get more information on Chaco Canyon’s occupation and abandonment, I want to Tucson to speak with two people.

Preposing/Fronting (to create focus)

Discouraged, he was; hopeless, he was not.

Abandon it they did, more than 800 years ago.

Among the invaders to grab headlines lately is an Asian fish called the snakehead.*

Adverbial (subordinate) clause

When Julio first visited the canyon in the 1970s, he asked himself a simple but important question.

Adverb:

Finally, the road reaches a gentle slope.

Prepositional phrase:

Across the flat valley, a deeply carved stream, small and almost completely dry, meanders weakly from side to side.

It/What Cleft (to create contrast)

It is their sheer size, of the firelight glow of their trunks, the gnarled yet proportioned beauty that neither word nor photograph ever really captures.#

There (to introduce new information)

There is no reason they could not occur today.

Source: “Super Drought in the Southwest,” *Muse* 13.5 (2009): 26-28 except for the following: Sentence in ‘Preposing’ marked with an asterisk: “Alien Invasion,” *Muse* 13.5 (2009):12 Sentence in ‘It cleft’ marked with #: “Big Birthday for a Big Tree,” *Sunset* (May 2002): 20

Options for modifiers: Tools for providing detail to a noun

The chart below includes sentences drawn from authentic texts. The complete sentences are listed in either the left or the right column (labeled as “Premodifiers” and “Postmodifiers,” respectively), with the modifiers underlined. The middle column shows explicitly the noun in each sentence that is modified either by a pre- or a postmodifier.

Premodifiers (before the noun)	Noun [Noun modified with premodifier is indicated in bold; noun modified with postmodifier is italicized]	Postmodifiers (after the noun)
Adjectives Careful research has revealed ancient roads that ran straight as an arrow for more than 40 miles.	research, roads <i>pavement</i>	Prepositional phrases The pavement <u>on State Highway 57</u>
Ving/Ven verb forms Evidence of a once <u>thriving and sophisticated</u> culture abounds.	culture <i>roads</i>	Relative clauses (<i>who/which/that</i>) Careful research has revealed ancient roads <u>that ran straight as an arrow for more than 40 miles.</u>
Nouns I look at the massive <u>stone</u> ruin towering above me.	stone <i>ruin</i>	Ving/Ven verb forms I look at the massive stone ruin <u>towering above me.</u> The largest, <u>called Pueblo Bonito,</u> covers more than four acres...
	<i>Google Earth</i> <i>feature</i>	Appositives (renamers) Google Earth, <u>the free program that lets users view close-up satellite images of almost anywhere in the world,</u> has a new feature: <u>Google Ocean.</u>
	<i>stream</i>	Out-of-order adjectives Across the flat valley, a deeply carved stream, <u>small and almost completely dry,</u> meanders weakly from side to side

Source: “Super Drought in the Southwest”, Muse 13.5 (2009): 26-28; for appositives, “Google Ocean Launched” Muse 13.5 (2009): 5

Cornelia Paraskevas is Professor of Linguistics and Writing at Western Oregon University. Her research interests include the contact zone between grammar and writing, first-year writing, and the language of Greek immigrants to the United States.