English Paragraph Construction Rules and Implementation Techniques*

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A complete English Paragraph consists of five parts: opening sentence, topic sentence, supporting sentences, concluding sentence (and sometimes transitional sentence). The paper explores the construction rules of paragraph and explains its implementation techniques. The significance lies in that it is helpful to the teaching and study in some fields like reading comprehension, speaking and writing.

Keywords: English paragraph, construction rules, implementation techniques

Introduction

A statement which contains one idea tells us about one thing. A statement that tells us about one thing is a simple statement. A simple statement can have six parts, but it does not always have so many.

The six parts includes: Subject (who/what/which) + Action + Object (who/which/what) + Adverbial of Manner (How) + Adverbial of Place (Where) + Adverbial of Time (When).

(When) can be at the beginning or at the end of a statement. (Table 1) (Alexander, 1997, pp. 13-14)

| When       | Who?            | Action | Who?          | How?       | Where? | When |
|------------|-----------------|--------|---------------|------------|--------|------|
| Last week  | I               | went   |               |            | to the theatre |     |

Table 1

The Order of the Words in a Statement (Taken from New Concept English 2)

The paragraph is made up of sentences. How to create a meaningful discourse has been studied by many scholars (Jones, 2018; Gee, 2014). Most studies pay more attention to the cohesion and coherence (Halliday & Hason, 1997; Wang & Wu, 2014; Wu & Wang, 2012). Few studies focus on the structure of a paragraph. As we all know, there are some construction rules for the sentences to create paragraphs. In other words, the paragraph

*Acknowledgements: The paper is funded by the projects of East China University of Science and Technology: JGS01201001, YS0222301901001, YS0125322 and YS0222361903001.

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structure is the first step to understand the cohesion and coherence of discourse. Three questions will be discussed as follows:

(1) What is the paragraph structure? How to layout a paragraph?
(2) What is the function of key words in the topic sentence?
(3) How to layout the supporting sentences?

Discussion

A Paragraph Structure

A paragraph is a group of sentences that forms a unit. It is a distinct section of writing covering one topic. Usually it contains more than one sentence. According to the statement structure mentioned above, we constitute a paragraph structure:

\[
\text{Paragraph} = \text{OS} + [ts] + \text{TS} + [ts] + \text{SS(1 es)} + [ts] + \text{CS}
\]

Notes: OS=Opening Sentence; TS=Topic Sentence; SS(es)=Supporting Sentences; CS=Concluding Sentence; [ts]= transition sentence

That is, an English paragraph can have five parts, but it does not always have so many. Only a TS and SS(es) are necessary. An OS is usually the first sentence. It is sometimes absent. A TS is always the first sentence when an OS is absent. SS(es) are the sentences between the topic sentence and the concluding sentence. A [ts] plays a role of transition between preceding and proceeding sentences. It should be used from one sentence to the next that connects meaning. A [ts] has a very flexible position in a paragraph. [ts] will not be discussed in this paper. A CS is the last sentence in the paragraph and sometimes it is absent.

The paragraph structure above can be drawn into a family tree(Chart 2).

Chart 2. An English Paragraph Structure Family Tree.

From the family tree above, we can find that a paragraph should logically fit together. Here are some more notes in details:

(1) An OS aims to grab the reader’s attention. It can be done by using a few different types of hooks, which are a question, quote, statistic, or an anecdote. Sometimes it can be absent under certain condition.

(2) A TS introduces the topic of the paragraph. A good topic sentence often provides one or more than one key words so that it will be broad enough to allow for explication but narrow enough.
(3) The SS(es) support the topic sentence. They should be organized in a way that it builds appropriately. Syntagmatic and paradigmatic are the common way to display so many supporting sentences. Well-developed SS(es) are usually created based on the key words from a TS. One key word should be supported by one supporting sentence at least. When new key words occur in the supporting sentences, they should be explained by some sub-SS(es). In other words, the SS(es), as a body of paragraph, can be organized in syntagmatic and paradigmatic ways to support the key words. As we can see in Chart 2, SS1, SS2, SS3...are developed in syntagmatic layout based on the key words from a TS. While The SS1.1, SS1.1.1... shown in the chart are organized in paradigmatic layout according to the new key words from SS(es).

The syntagmatic layout includes parallel, contrast, and etc. The paradigmatic layout often contains causal, deduction and etc. Narration, description, process, classification, illustration, etc. are the common means in the SS(es) to elaborate the topic of paragraph.

Each paragraph needs a CS. It should succinctly end the paragraph and transit to the next paragraph, if appropriate.

Generally speaking, a paragraph can often be divided into two structures, one is CS-paragraph structure in which there is a CS; the other is NO-CS-paragraph structure in which there is no CS. An OS often appears in the NO-CS paragraph structure but not in CS paragraph structure.

Case Study

We take two Overviews from Book 3 of *New College English* (Li, 2014) as a case study. Each Unit in Book 3 consists of three parts: Overview, Text A and Text B. Each Unit has one theme. Each Overview is a 90-to-150-word paragraph which seems like an abstract of the unit. Text A and Text B are like evidences to support the unit theme.

Case 1 is from Unit One of Book 3 in *New College English*. The Unit Title is *Changes in the way we live*. The title of Text A is *Mr. Doherty Builds His Dream Life*. Text B is *American Family Life: The Changing Picture*.

The unit title gives two key words: *changes* and *the way we live* to highlight the Unit theme. To support the theme, the author chooses two texts with the same theme to support the unit theme. And the titles of Text A and Text B recur the key words of the Unit title in lexical way to highlight the theme. (see Table 3)

| Name  | Title                                      | Key words                  |
|-------|--------------------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Unit title | Changes in the way we live                  | changes  the way we live   |
| Text A | Mr. Doherty Builds His Dream Life           | Mr. Doherty  dream life    |
| Text B | American Family Life: The Changing Picture  | American family life  the changing picture |

We input all the sentences in the Overview into Table 4 to explore the construction rules of paragraph. We use different colors to show the different key words.
Table 4

Recurrence Way of Key Words in the Paragraph

| Name      | Recurrence ways | Key Words                  | Content                                                                 |
|-----------|-----------------|----------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| TS        | Changes         | The way we live in many shapes and sizes. |
| SS (es)   | Some take place in one sudden leap. Such was the dramatic change in the way of life experienced by the author of our first text, when he decided to quit the city and go off to start a new life in the country. Other changes seem to creep up on us, sometimes from a variety of directions. Such has been the case with changes to family life over the years, as can be seen in our second text, which weighs the increased individual freedom family members now enjoy against the costs to family unity. |
| CS        | Pronoun         | some...others              | We trust this unit will give you the opportunity to reflect on such changes and the resources to express your own feelings about them. |

From the table, we know that the paragraph (Overview) is a very typical CS-paragraph structure. Its structure is:

Para. = TS + SS \((es)\) + CS.

According to the structure, an OS is missing. A TS provides three keywords, “Changes, the way we live and “in many shapes and sizes”. the two key words, such as “changes”and “the way we live” both recurs 5 times in lexical forms, “the in many shapes and sizes” appears once. (see Table 5).

Table 5
Recurrence Ways of Key Words

| Name      | Recurrence ways | Key Words                  | Content                                                                 |
|-----------|-----------------|----------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Lexical form | Pronoun         | some...others              | The way we live in many shapes and sizes.                               |
| The same word | change          | changes                    | The way we live in many shapes and sizes.                               |
| Synonymy  | The same word   | life                       | The way we live in many shapes and sizes.                               |
| Related words | family members | family unite              | The way we live in many shapes and sizes.                               |
| Times     | Pronoun         | 6                          | 1                          | We trust this unit will give you the opportunity to reflect on such changes and the resources to express your own feelings about them. |

The paragraph uses the syntagmatic layout to organize the evidences to contrast the theme of “change the way we live”. phrases like some.....other changes.... and in one sudden leap and creep up are used to highlight the changes between “today” and “the old days”. The paragraph family tree is drawn as follows:

TS : Changes in the way we live come in many shapes and sizes

/   \
SS1  SS2

\   \
Some ...... other changes

\   \ in one sudden leap
creep up on

CS : We trust this unit will give you...reflect on such changes .....
Case 2 focuses on Civil-Rights Heroes. The unit title is *Civil-Rights Heroes*. The title of Text A is *The Freedom Givers*. Text B is *Rosa Parks: The Mother of the American Civil rights Movement*. There are two key words in the unit title: *Civil-Rights* and *Heroes*. Text A and Text B use synonymy to highlight the key words provided by a TS to enforce the theme. (See Table 7)

**Table 7**

*The Recurrence of Key Words*

| Name      | Title                                             | Key Words     |
|-----------|---------------------------------------------------|---------------|
| Unit title| *Civil-Rights Heroes*                             | Civil-Rights  |
| Text A    | *The Freedom Givers*                              | Heroes        |
| Text B    | *Rosa Parks: The Mother of the American Civil rights Movement* | Civil rights Movement | Rosa Parks |

We input all the sentences in the Overview into Table 8 to explore the construction rules of paragraph. We use different color to show the different key words.

**Table 8**

*The Recurrence Way of Key Words in the Paragraph*

| Name | Content                                                                                                                                 |
|------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| OS   | The election of Barack Obama as President of the United States was only made possible by a struggle by African Americans and their supporters to overcome prejudice and discrimination based on the color of one’s skin, a struggle that reaches way back into the past. |
| TS   | In this unit we offer insights into the character of some important figures in this long journey, starting with those who bravely fought slavery by assisting slaves to freedom before slavery was abolished. |
| SS1  | We then move on to look at the start of the modern civil rights movement and the leading role played in it by one woman, Rosa Parks. |
| CS   |                                                                                                                                 |

Case 2 is a No-CS paragraph. A CS is missing in the paragraph. The structure is given as follows:

Para.=OS+TS+SS(\text{ex})

Some notes should be given as follows:

1. An OS, as an introduction to the Overview, keeps showing many words related to the civil rights, like struggle and prejudice and discrimination, based on the color of one’s skin to grasp the reader’s attention.

2. A TS uses synonymy the character of some important figures to recur the key words from the unit title *Civil-Rights, Heroes*.

3. The evidences in SS(\text{ex}) are organized in syntagmatic juxtaposition layout to support the topic.

4. There is no CS in the paragraph, but an OS gives a summary introduction in the very beginning in the paragraph. In other words, when a CS is absent, the paragraph must have a summary-like OS.

The paragraph can be drawn in the family tree below.
**Conclusion**

A paragraph is a unit of writing in a larger body of work. A paragraph expresses a particular topic or theme. The conclusions are drawn: a complete English Paragraph consists of five parts: opening sentence, topic sentence, supporting sentences, concluding sentence (and sometimes transition sentence). Not every Paragraph requires an opening sentence, but every Paragraph should have a topic sentence and supporting sentences. Sometimes a concluding sentence is not required. When a paragraph has no CS, the summary-like OS mustn’t be absent.

The key words in topic sentences guide the narrative trend of supporting sentences. They predict the length of paragraphs theoretically. The SS(es) are often organized in the syntagmatic and paradigmatic layout from temporal and spatial perspective.

The paper will bring some significance to the classroom teaching and it is good to students’ reading comprehension, speaking and writing ability.

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