Reviews


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"The mature writer," Mina Shaughnessy hypothesized in *Errors and Expectations*, "is recognized not so much by the quality of his individual sentences as by his ability to relate sentences in such a way as to create a flow of sentences, a pattern of thought that is produced, one suspects, according to the principles of yet another kind of grammar—a grammar, let us say, of passages" (226). Now Richard Coe proposes the kind of "grammar" Shaughnessy imagined, a method for analyzing the structure of meaning in prose passages "beyond the sentence" by means of a "discourse matrix," a two-dimensional graphic representation of the logical semantic relationships among statements in a text.

Francis Christensen's generative rhetoric contributes the "key" assumptions: that statements in a prose passage may be classified according to relative level of generality and patterns of modification among them. Ellen Nold and Brent Davis contribute a method (which Coe simplifies and refines) for representing these relationships by lines and numbers, thereby saving the analyst from laboriously rewriting passages, as Christensen did, to show their structure. Using this method, Coe can model any passage by using three basic principles: (1) the T-units in a passage, indicated by numbered circles representing each unit's order; (2) the logical (or "modifying") relationships to other T-units, represented by lines connecting the circles; and (3) the relative levels of generality, represented by higher or lower positioning of the circles on the page. Thus, the structure of a five-sentence paragraph—that might take twelve lines and three degrees of indentation to write out in Christensen's method—can be represented by Coe's matrix (35) as:

![Diagram of a discourse matrix representing a five-sentence paragraph]

Clearly, the result is an efficient and elegant way to model in a small space the structure of even long passages with multiple levels of generality.

Coe has further refined this instrument in several ways. For example, following Nold and Davis and David Karrfalt, Coe adds to Christensen's levels of *coordination* and *subordination* the category of *superordination*, a level more general than that of the one preceding it. Because the resulting model is more sophisticated than its predecessors, it allows us to ask such questions as how to distinguish a superordinate statement from a change of subtopic (which would pair a T-unit with another besides the one immediately preceding it); how to make explicit our tacit understanding of punctuation marks such as the colon, semicolon, and dash; and why we cannot have simple answers to the question, "When is a paragraph?"
One application of this matrix will occur immediately to any teacher who has turned to graphic "re-presentations"—idea trees, outlines, clusters—in the hope that students will see, through the distancing such metaphors afford, the underlying logical structure—or lack of it—in their writing. Coe speculates, however, that while most students can learn his method easily, many English teachers will resist it because they feel "insecure with diagrams" (103). I suspect instead that teachers feel skeptical of models (like Christensen's) that work with prewashed textbook examples but not with real prose. Here, the sophistication of the discourse matrix appears its virtue: it allows analysts to pinpoint the places where there are ambiguities or shifts in topic that are difficult to represent using earlier methods of graphic analysis.

But in order to understand "ill-formed" prose, Coe argues, students need to know more than just whether a statement is out of logical sequence. They need to understand form as evidence of the way that "an individual's act of invention is mediated by conventional forms preferred or prescribed by a discourse community." (75). For example, Coe shows what we ethnocentrically regard as "good form" to be a pattern of inductive reasoning only developed during the last four centuries, a pattern alien to our feudal ancestors and to our non-Western contemporaries (as Coe's research colleagues in China demonstrate in one of the most fascinating chapters in the book). If we thus regard form as a cultural construct, we can use the matrix to make explicit to basic writers the multileveled forms of academic discourse alien to them. More to the point for readers of *JAC*, advanced students can discover the structures of specialized discourses—technical writing, say, or legal discourse—that may not reflect the conventions they mastered in freshman composition.

Coe's aim, in other words, is to empower students as readers as well as writers. He summarizes research demonstrating that students can use the matrix to teach themselves what we, entranced with invention as prewriting, have too often failed to teach: the logical patterns of privileged discourse. Here, his work looks beyond logic to rhetoric and politics: Who in any culture is given the right to speak—and who silenced? What does knowledge of forms have to do with such rights? What, finally, is the relationship between the forms of language and "the context of power, of effects" (74)?

The limitation of Coe's instrument is, of course, that in defining discourse as passages of prose, it cannot in itself compel such looking-beyond: "Regarding the other crucial sense of discourse, the relationship between texts and their communicative contexts, the discourse matrix can only raise and focus our questions; for it delineates contextual relationships of statements only within the text (except insofar as other contexts are implicit in the act of reading)" (74). This limitation presents problems even for Coe himself. Consider, for instance, this paragraph that he quotes to exemplify the ill-formed prose of basic writers:

(1) I started my reading before I started school. (2) My mother always encouraged my reading. (3) When I was young she would take the time to read to me and also try and teach me to read. (4) I can remember the first volume of *The Nancy Drew Mystery Stories* that my mother bought for me, and my faithfully reading and buying the other volumes until I had completed the set. (5) In the fourth grade, my mother made a big fuss with the principal of my school because my teacher would not let me read if I finished my work early. (6) In the fifth and sixth grades I won first place in the library contest.

(7) The point that I'm trying to make is that I've been brought up to believe that reading is full of pleasure, not tedious as some people say it is. (8) Reading also expands vocabulary by implementing new words that you can either understand from context or by looking them up in a dictionary. (9) Books expand your knowledge by going into detail and initiating new subject matter. (62)
Coe then draws the matrix of this passage like this:

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1 2
3 4 5 6
7 8 9
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The matrix reveals that the generalization beginning the second paragraph actually is supported by the preceding paragraph, while the last sentences, 8 and 9, "totally lack support." This seems clear enough. But then Coe offers this analysis as an example of how the discourse matrix can show what is missing in the text. In this case, he concludes, the best solution would be to add to the development of sentences 8 and 9, turning the whole into a five-paragraph essay or, at least, three paragraphs, with this overall thesis: "To me, reading is good because it signifies pleasure as well as an opportunity to build my vocabulary and expand my knowledge." Alas, this is a case of an author not preaching what he practices. If Coe himself had settled for such banalities, surely he never would have written such a thought-provoking book.

Let me suggest that we see this writer as someone who is learning exactly what David Bartholomae would argue she needs to learn: how to "con-form" to the privileged structures of academic discourse yet use them to push back against the commonplaces that would speak through her—here, the utilitarian definition of reading as self-improving work. She is shaping her resistance in the form of what Marie Ponsot and Rosemary Deen call "The Essay of the Opposing Voice": "They say _____, but my experience tells me ______." (Beat Not the Poor Desk 74-78). "They say that reading is tedious, but my experience tells me it is full of pleasure." And her draft implies possible subdivisions of her topic contrary to what "they" say, learning to read does not require a minimum age or trained teacher; it is fostered better by reading certain authors in depth than by sampling various "subject matters." As a teacher of the humanities, I want to encourage this kind of thinking. Does this mean that I fail to recognize the formal weakness in her prose? Of course not. But before addressing that problem, I would want to ask this writer what she perceived as her main line of thought, hoping she'd at least consider throwing out those last two sentences. And I would expect her to need reassurance to do this, having most likely been trained by formalists more interested in having her make statements "fit" than in asking whether she should want to.

But Coe claims that he is not a formalist. Why, then, his form-driven reading of this student's text? The answer, I think, lies in Burke's admonition (in A Rhetoric of Motives) that form considered as pattern is not merely generative but seductive: "Once you grasp the trend of the form, it invites participation regardless of the subject matter" (58; emphasis added). For this reason, while we cannot disregard form in working with student writing, we might best postpone applying formal analysis to such time as when the subject matter has had a chance to be carefully regarded. Otherwise (as Burke would also warn us), a way of seeing will become a way of not seeing.

Coe's monograph is rich and wise, written in a lucid style that is his method's own best witness. I mean no criticism of his accomplishment when I say that his discourse matrix, like any powerful instrument, should be labeled "Handle with care."