

Your First Peer Review

Span 200g :: Spring 2008

Monday, February 4, 2008

Where Are We?

We have started thinking about language acquisition by reading chapter 1 of Jo Napoli's textbook. The reading gave us an opportunity to think about the structure of complex arguments, and it gave you an excuse to start writing.

By now, you should have completed your first "lab report" (your first written assignment.) The goal was to argue for or against the view that language acquisition is a process guided by innate principles. If you have spent enough time thinking about the organization of your assignment, you must have produced a complex argument yourself. We are now going to see how easy it is for your classmates to follow your argument.

To do so, your assignment (which should be anonymous) will be distributed among your classmates. You will get somebody else's assignment, and one of your classmates will get yours. Your task now is to give your classmate feedback about how to improve his or her assignment so that (i) it presents a real argument, and (ii) it is easy to read for people like you. You will see that this is not an easy task. To make it easier, we will break the process down to a series of simpler tasks.

Step One: Your First Impressions (5 mins.)

Start by reading the assignment that you have been given. Keep a log with your impressions. Do you think it is easy to understand? Why? Why not? At this stage, you will probably be guided only by fuzzy intuitions. It might be hard to explain now why you found the reading easy/hard to understand. Give it a try, though. Write a small paragraph summarizing your first impressions. Be ready to talk about them to the class.

Step Two: The Main Claim (10 mins.)

Let's try to understand now the reasons behind your first impressions. To do so, we will try to understand the structure of the argument that the assignment presents.

An argument starts with a series of claims that the author thinks should be taken for granted (the premises), and shows you that if you assume those claims, you have no other choice but accept that a central claim (a thesis) follows from them. So let's start by identifying what the central claim (the thesis) of the assignment is. If the argument is structured and well organized, this should pose no problem. Write down a full sentence that summarizes what the main claim of the assignment is:

- (1) The main claim of the assignment is:

If you can't identify what the main claim of the assignment is, something has gone wrong. Think about how easy or how difficult it has been for you to identify the main thesis of the assignment. Is there no main claim to begin with? Is it there, but not clearly stated? Should it have been placed in a more prominent place? Write a full paragraph giving the author of the assignment advice about how to improve the way the main claim of the assignment is stated:

- (2) Advice on how to make the main claim of the assignment more prominent:

Step Three: Reasons (10 mins.)

Now that you have identified what the main claim of the assignment is, think about how the author justifies it. Start by making a list of reasons for the main claim.

- (3)
 - 1.
 - 2.
 - 3.
 - 4.

5. ...

How many reasons for the main claim have you been able to identify? How easy or how difficult has it been for you to spot them? Are they stated prominently? Do they follow / precede the main claim? Don't think yet about how bad or good those reasons are, just think about how they are stated. Write a paragraph giving the author advice on how the reasons are presented. Are there enough of them? Are they clearly stated? Are they presented like a list? Do they build on each other? Does the author present them as self-evident claims? Does the author give any reasons for them?

- (4) Advice on how to improve the presentation of the reasons supporting the main claim:

Step Four: Evaluating the Reasons (10 mins.)

Now it's time for you to think about how well these reasons support the main claim. Start by thinking about whether they are easy to understand. Are they clearly stated? To answer this question, think about whether you can state those reasons using your own words in simple, short sentences. If you find this hard to do, the reasons are not clearly stated. Give advice to the author of the assignment on how to restate the reasons.

- (5) Advice on how to restate the reasons that support the main claim:

Now think about to what extent these reasons force you to accept the main thesis of the assignment. For each of the reasons presented, try to come up with a counterargument that shows why they shouldn't be accepted.

- (6) 1.
2.
3.
4.

5. ...

Now give the author of the assignment advice about how to a stronger case for his/her thesis. For each of the reasons presented, point out how to avoid the problems that you have just presented.

- (7) 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
5. ...