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AN OVERVIEW OF DEVELOPMENT OF THE TOPIC SENTENCE IN THE ENGLISH PARAGRAPH

Jinsei Nakamura

0. Introduction

The English paragraph, which is "not only a logical unit but a psychological unit as well," (Chandle: p. 220) is the basic information unit in English. In this paper, most of our discussion will be on the relation maintained between the topic sentence and its supporting sentences in the English paragraph.

The chief purpose of the present study is to attempt to find general characteristics for an effective development of the topic sentence in the English paragraph.

1. Topic sentence and Its Supporting Sentences

Prior to proceeding with our discussion on the subject, let us take a look at the definition of the two different types of sentences in the English paragraph as framed by Frank Chaplen. For the present paper we will adopt the definition.

He defines the topic sentence as:

"If the controlling idea is contained in one sentence, that sentence is called the topic sentence. It is called the topic sentence because it contains the idea or topic that is developed and explained in the rest of the paragraph. This sentence may be found in any position in a paragraph: at the beginning, in the middle, or at the end." (Chaplen: p. 8 - 9 )

He describes the supporting sentence as:

"With the exception of the topic sentence, each sentence in a good paragraph may be classified into one of two groups: major support sentence (Hereafter abbreviated as MSS) or minor support sentences (MRSS)." (p. 14 )
2. Topic Sentence and Its Supporting Sentences

In the following sections we will examine example paragraphs and observe how the two types of sentences should be organized together in the English paragraph.

2.1. The Topic Sentence With Irrelevant Ideas

Look at the following paragraph written by a Japanese college student:

In summer, Okinawa is ideal for various kinds of sports. The beautiful coral, the transparent water and the clear blue sky are strong points for Okinawa and two thirds of a year is summertime. This is the reason why many travelers from abroad make a journey to spend their summer vacation on Okinawa. The facilities for recreation are getting better and the Prefectural Government of Okinawa is eager to make the place for a sightseeing island.¹

The first sentence seems to be the topic sentence of the paragraph. The second, third, and fourth sentences are written as supporting sentences. These sentences, however, are not closely related to the student's topic sentence and they should be omitted since they don't support the main idea that the topic sentence expresses. Instead of talking about the natural scenery of Okinawa in the long summer and tourists from abroad, the student should have developed the topic sentence fully with suitable and effective supporting sentences. This is an example of the undeveloped topic sentence which has irrelevant supporting ideas.

2.2. Paragraph with Lack of Supporting Ideas

The next paragraph, written also by a Japanese college student, is another example which has an undeveloped topic sentence. The problem here is that the main idea expressed by the topic sentence, "There are reasons why I am studying English at the university," has not been completely developed and explained in the paragraph.
There are reasons why I am studying English at the university. First, I like to go to America to visit my sister who is living with her husband and their three children. My sister left Okinawa for the country six years ago. She often writes us and says she would like to visit us as early as possible. My English is still poor. So I am afraid that I would not communicate with her family.

The topic sentence of the paragraph is "There are some reasons why I am studying English at the university." The reader, therefore, expects to read about some reasons in the sentences that follow. Only one reason, however, is given in the paragraph: "First, I like to go to America to visit my sister who is living with her husband and their three children." The reader is left asking what the other reasons are. That is, the topic sentence is not completely developed.

The next example paragraph has been quoted from Chaplen:

"I admire my friend Richard because he is so talented, intelligent, and kind. He is also very intelligent and can understand complex problems very quickly. Above all, he is very kind to others. I admire my friend for all these reasons."

He gives the following explanation for the paragraph.

"The example paragraph has a clear main idea, or a topic sentence: the three reasons why the writer admires his friend. The main idea is, however, not completely or even partially developed. The writer must give examples of his friend's talents, intelligence, and kindness."

2.3. Ideas Too General to Support the Topic Sentence

Now observe the following paragraph quoted from Moore. (sec. ed. p. 109)

It was one of nicest evenings I've ever spent. We went lots of places and did all sorts of things and fi-
nally go home, tired but happy, in the wee hours of the morning. Don’t you wish you had come with us?

In the example the supporting ideas in the second sentence are so general that the paragraph has not been developed fully. The expression such as, “We went lots of places” and “We did all sorts of things” in the second sentence should have been developed concretely and specifically since they are not the topic sentence but supporting sentences in the particular paragraph. The topic sentence itself, moreover, is not a suitable one since it has a too general word, ‘nicest’ as its assertion. The third sentence, “Don’t you wish you had come with us?” does not support the controlling idea but asks a question which should not have been included in the paragraph since the purpose of the paragraph seems to communicate the controlling idea in the topic sentence, but not re-create an experience. Generally speaking, the paragraph is “vague and fuzzy.” (4th ed. :p.146)

2.4. MSS and MRSS

Let us go into a little more detailed to the topic sentence in the English paragraph.

Chaplen defines the function of supporting sentences as:

“A major supporting sentence has one job: it develops the main or controlling idea of a paragraph by telling the reader something new or different about that idea. It directly supports the main idea by making that idea more easily and clearly understood.”

“A minor supporting sentence has two jobs: (1) it develops its major supporting sentence telling the reader something new or different about that sentence, and (2) at the same time it helps its major supporting sentence develop the main idea. It directly supports its major supporting sentence by making it more easily understood. Therefore, a minor supporting sentence must be
closely related both to its major supporting sentence and to the main idea of the paragraph."

Observe the following paragraph.

In December of 1956 there was a great deal happening at the South Pole. A tiny village of six huts was rising from the snow. For many months to come, those little huts would be the home of 18 scientists and Navy men from the United States. (Excerpted from Reader's Digest Readings, A.T. Kitchin and V.F. Allen, 1971, p. 41)

The topic sentence of the paragraph is the first sentence. Two other sentences are major supporting sentences which tell new and different things about the main idea, directly supporting the main idea which is expressed by the topic sentence. Without any question, both the topic sentence and its supporting sentence are logically organized.

The next paragraph is an example written by a Japanese college student in which a couple of minor supporting sentences can be found.

(1) I like my old camping car.  (2) I come to school by the car.  (3) I find pleasure in taking my sister for her shopping over weekends by the old car.  (4) Last summer, I enjoyed an overnight stay with my friend in the near a beach in the northern of the island.  (5) Although it began raining in the evening, we had barbecued beef, frankfurter and cold beer in the small temporary bed room on the car.  (6) In midnight, we enjoyed a gentle breeze from the ocean.

The topic sentence of the example paragraph is the first sentence "I like my old camping car." Sentences (2), (3), and (4) are MSS's since they directly support the topic sentence. Sentences (5) and (6), however, are MRSS's since they directly support their MSS, sentence (4).

As we have seen in the two examples above, it is very common for the topic sentence to be supported by either only MSS's or by MSS's
which sometimes have MRSS's in the English paragraph.

It is, moreover, quite possible that the topic sentence can be supported by MSS's which all have MRSS's, as shown in the following example paragraph written by a Japanese student.

(1) My father is a hard working man. (2) Everyday he goes to his farm early in the morning. (3) When I get up he has already spent a couple of hours working with his small tractor which he bought last year. (4) According to my mother he usually leaves home for his farm an hour before the sun rises almost everyday. (5) The old farmer is also busy after coming home from his farm where he usually spends several hours. (6) He cleans the pigpen. (7) He also waters the garden in the front yard.

Sentence (1) is the topic sentence of the paragraph. It is directly supported by sentences (2) and (5) which are its MSS's. The rest of the sentences, however, are all MRSS's which directly support their MSS's. Sentence (3) and (4) support sentence (2) and sentences (6) and (7) support sentence (5).

In these example paragraphs we have observed the mutual relation maintained between the topic sentence and its supporting sentences, MSS's and MRSS's.

The development of the topic sentence in the English paragraph might be illustrated by the following single and general diagram with the note following.
2.5. Problems Caused by An Unnecessary Number of MRSS's

It is logically possible, as shown in the diagram above, that MRSS's have more detailed supporting sentences which directly develop their MRSS's, and at the same time help their MRSS's and MSS's develop the main idea.

It might be safe to say that the more MSS's, MRSS's or other more detailed supporting sentences the paragraph has, the more detailed or complicated a paragraph it is. However, the English paragraph is, sometimes, not clear and effective when it has an unnecessary number of MRSS's which can sometimes hinder the reader's following the main idea.

Observe the next paragraph written by a Japanese college student:

(1) Ishigaki is the central island in the Yaeyama islands which are composed of nine small islands. (2) There is a big mountain which symbolizes Yaeyama. (3) We call it Mt. Omoto. (4) It is well known to many people as the biggest throughout Okinawa. (5) The height is 525 meters. (6) Its scenery is very wonderful. (7) The population of the island is the largest in the Yaeyama islands. (8) There are many office buildings and schools there. (9) The city of Ishigaki in the business center of the islands.

The topic sentence is the first sentence. Sentences (2), (7), (8) and (9) are MSS's. Sentences (3), (4), (5) and (6) are, however, MRSS's. In other
words, the paragraph has four MSS's and four MRSS's all of which directly develop their MSS,""There is a big mountain which symbolizes Yaeyama." This part of the paragraph hinders the reader from following the main idea expressed by the topic sentence. In order to avoid such a complicated and ineffective paragraph, we should take out the complicating portion to make a new paragraph, such as:

On Ishigaki island, there is a big mountain which symbolizes the Yaeyama Island. We call it Mt. Omoto. It is well known to many people of Okinawa for its height. It is 525 meters high. The scenery is very wonderful.

Thus, both the original and the new paragraph become clear to the reader. Notice, however, that the MSS and MRSS's taken from the original paragraph have been changed to the topic sentence and the MSS's respectively in the new paragraph. If necessary, moreover it is quite possible to add new MSS's and MRSS's to the new paragraph as well as to the original one so that they can be effectively developed.

3. Conclusion

In the course of our discussion, we have observed the development of the topic sentence and its supporting sentences in the English paragraph.

It could briefly be summarized here that the topic sentence in the English paragraph should be effectively and fully supported by its supporting sentences, MSS's, MRSS's, and by more detailed supporting sentences if necessary, whose ideal number cannot be simply determined without consideration of such factors as kinds of writings and the ability of the reader.
Note

1. A few grammatical corrections have been made to the original English paragraphs written for this paper by Japanese students including this particular one.
2. I wish to thank Mr. Jene Van Troyer, instructor of English, Okinawa Junior College of English and Business, for reading and commenting on the paper. Needless to say, any errors in the text are my own.

References


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