The Seven Standards of Textuality

Text has been defined as a communicative occurrence/event which meets seven standards of textuality (cohesion, coherence, intentionality, acceptability, informativity, situationality, and intertextuality). Linguists confirm that if any of these standards of textuality is not to have been satisfied, the text will not be communicative.

1. Cohesion

The first standard of textuality is called cohesion. Cohesion is the network of lexical, grammatical, and other relations that provide links between various parts of a text. These relations or ties organise a text by requiring the reader to interpret words and expressions by reference to other words and expressions in the surrounding sentences and paragraphs. Moreover, cohesion is seen as a non-structural semantic relation, as for example, between a pronoun and its antecedent in a preceding sentence, expressing at each stage in the discourse the point of context with what has gone before. A cohesive device is the interpretative link between, for example, a pronoun and its antecedent, or two lexically linked NPs, and a series of such ties (having the same referent) is referred to as a ‘cohesive chain’.

Halliday and Hasan (1976) establish five cohesion categories: reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunctions, and lexical cohesion. In clarifying the notion of ‘cohesion’ and ‘cohesive device’, Halliday and Hasan (1976: 1) present the following examples:

a. Wash and core six cooking apples. Put them into a fireproof dish.

b. My axe is blunt. I have to get a sharper one.

c. Did you see John? - Yes Ø.

d. They fought a battle. Afterwards, it snowed.

Here, the two sentences, in each example, are linked to each other by a cohesive link; in each instance a different cohesive item is implemented. In example (a), the two sentences are linked by the pronoun ‘them’, in the second sentence, which refers anaphorically to the noun phrase ‘six cooking apples’, in the first sentence. In (b) this relation is established by
the presence of the substitute ‘one’ in the second sentence, which is a counter of the noun ‘axe’ in the first sentence of the same example; in (c) the cohesive relation is achieved by the omission of some element in the second sentence that presupposes the first sentence. In example (d) none of the above relations exist; the conjunction or conjunctive adjunct ‘afterwards’ is not an anaphoric relation like the previous ones; it does not instruct the reader to search for the meaning of the element to interpret it as in reference, or the replacement of some linguistic element by a counter or by a blank, as are substitution and ellipsis, “but a specification of the way in which what is to follow is systematically connected to what has gone before” (Halliday and Hasan, 1976: 227).

As for the main cohesion category called lexical cohesion, Halliday and Hasan present the following examples:

“There is a boy climbing the tree”

a. The boy’s going to fall if he does not take care.

b. The lad’s going to fall if he does not take care.

c. The child’s going to fall if he does not take care.

d. The idiot’s going to fall if he does not take care.

In example (a), there is a repetition of the same lexical item: ‘boy’, in (b), the reiteration takes the form of a synonym or nearsynonym ‘lad’; in (c), of the superordinate the term ‘child’; and in (d), of a general word ‘idiot’.

All these instances have in common the fact that one lexical item refers back to another, to which it is related by having a common referent.

2. Coherence

Like cohesion, coherence is a network of relations which organise and create a text: cohesion is the network of surface relations which link words and expressions to other words and expressions in a text, and coherence is the network of conceptual relations which underlie the surface text. Both concern the way stretches of language are connected to each other. In the case of cohesion, stretches of language are connected to each other by virtue of lexical and grammatical dependencies. In the case of coherence, they are connected by virtue of conceptual or meaning dependencies as perceived by language users. Hoey (1991: 12) sums up the difference between cohesion and coherence as follows:
"We will assume that cohesion is a property of the text and that coherence is a facet [i.e. side] of the reader's evaluation of a text. In other words, cohesion is objective, capable in principle of automatic recognition, while coherence is subjective and judgements concerning it may vary from reader to reader."

We could say that cohesion is the surface expression of coherence relations, that it is a device for making conceptual relations explicit. For example, a conjunction such as 'therefore' may express a conceptual notion of 'reason' or 'consequence'. However, if the reader cannot perceive an underlying semantic relation of 'reason' or 'consequence' between the propositions connected by 'therefore', he will not be able to make sense of the text in question; in other words, the text will not 'cohere' for this particular reader. Generally speaking, the mere presence of cohesive markers cannot create a coherent text; cohesive markers have to reflect conceptual relations which make sense. Enkvist (1978b: 110-11) gives an example of a highly cohesive text which is nevertheless incoherent:

I bought a Ford. The car in which President Wilson rode down the Champs Elysees was black. Black English has been widely discussed. The discussions between the presidents ended last week. A week has seven days. Every day I feed my cat. Cats have four legs.

The fact that we cannot make sense of stretches of language like the one quoted above, in spite of the presence of a number of cohesive markers, suggests that what actually gives texture to a stretch of language is not the presence of cohesive markers but our ability to recognise underlying semantic relations which establish continuity of sense. The main value of cohesive markers seems to be that they can be used to facilitate and possibly control the interpretation of underlying semantic relations.

The coherence of a text is a result of the interaction between knowledge presented in the text and the reader's own knowledge and experience of the world, the latter being influenced by a variety of factors such as age, sex, race, nationality, education, occupation, and political and religious affiliations. Even a simple cohesive relation of co-reference cannot be recognised, and therefore cannot be said to contribute to the coherence of a text.

Coherence can be illustrated by causality, as in: (A) Jack fell down and (B) he broke his crown. Here, (A) is the cause of (B).

Coherence can be illustrated by enablement or reason, as in: Jack (A) spent two days working on the problem and he (B) found the solution. (A) enabled (B) or (A) is the reason that led to (B).
3. Intentionality

While cohesion and coherence are to a large extent text-centred, intentionality is user-centred. A text-producer normally seeks to achieve a purpose or goal (e.g. persuasion, instruction, request, information, etc.) based on a given plan. Obviously, cohesion and coherence are taken into consideration while planning and executing one's plan. Speakers or writers vary in the degree of success in planning and achieving their purposes.

4. Acceptability

The receiver's attitude is that a text is cohesive and coherent. The reader usually supplies information that is missing or unstated. Acceptability is very much sensitive to the social activity the text is fulfilling. A legal contract does not leave much room for inference. It contains what, otherwise, is called redundancies. Poetic language will be viewed as such because it calls on for inferences.

Acceptability is very much affected by the reader's social and cultural background. The joke of the priest who, on shaving his beard in the morning cut his chin because he was thinking of the sermon he was about to give, and the advice his fellow priest gave him, "Cut your sermon and concentrate on your beard", was not very much appreciated by some students belonging to different culture.

5. Informativity

A text has to contain some new information. A text is informative if it transfers new information, or information that was unknown before. Informativity should be seen as a gradable phenomenon. The degree of informativity varies from participant to participant in the communicative event. Situationality contributes to the informativity of the text. A book written in 1950 has an informativity that was high appropriate then.

6. Situationality

A text is relevant to a particular social or pragmatic context. Situationality is related to real time and place. Communicative partners as well as their attitudinal state are important for the text's meaning, purpose and intended effect. Scientific texts share a common situationality, while ideological texts have different situationalities across languages and cultures.
7. Intertextuality

The seventh standard of textuality is called intertextuality. A text is related to other texts. Intertextuality refers "to the relationship between a given text and other relevant texts encountered in prior experience." (Neubert and Shreve, 1992: 117). These include textual conventions and textual expectations. Some text features have become more and more international, e.g. medical texts. They exhibit many features that are English-like, even they are written in Arabic. There is a fine line between plagiarism and intertextuality.