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ABSTRACT

Children learning to read are often exposed to "stories" which are really little more than lists of sentences. A good story has at least continuity and conflict which may be analyzed in two ways: story grammar (analysis of setting and plot) and plans and beliefs (analysis of the plans and beliefs of the characters, including the reader's understanding of the events of the story). Using the story "The Fox and the Rooster" to illustrate these two methods of text analysis, we find that story grammar provides a summary of events but ignores the internal structure of the plans and the beliefs of the characters concerning actions which occur. A plans and beliefs analysis includes an analysis of the reader because individuals have different beliefs and expectations (for example, about foxes, roosters, dogs, and stories). Sometimes the writer's understanding and the reader's understanding are different, and "misunderstanding" of the story results. This appears as a reader comprehension problem but may be a problem of point of view about social roles and behavior as discovered through a plans and beliefs analysis. (TJ)

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CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF READING

Reading Education Report No. 5

WHAT MAKES A GOOD STORY?

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What Makes a Good Story?[1]

Why do so many children have problems learning to read? Why do they consider it a chore rather than a natural and exciting extension of early language experiences? Part of the answer may rest in the quality of the written materials that are imposed on them in school. Children today have some freedom in choosing what television programs to watch, but not in choosing a reading or social studies text.

Think for a moment of the child who has limited reading experiences outside school, who has few books, and who does not hear stories being read. In the early grades, s/he encounters a series of texts that commonly stress decoding skills. Often, they sacrifice the story line on the assumption that component skills need to be taught independently. Thus, it is assumed, story structure can be taught when its time comes; there is no need to demand high quality stories when one is teaching decoding. Later in school, it is assumed that the child is already a reader. The skills that the child is supposed to have learned only need to be "applied" while reading difficult stories and expository texts.

Text Analysis

This paper discusses two methods of text analysis used in research on children's understanding of stories. These methods are culturally bound; that is, they reflect a conception of stories that has arisen in Western culture. Within these boundaries, however, there is still a diversity of texts. Our preliminary results using these methods show

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[1]This is a slightly revised version of an article that appeared under the same title in Language Arts, 1978, 55, 460-466. It is included in this series of papers with the permission of NCTE.

that stories are more complex than adults might at first think; that good stories have structures that can be identified and studied; and that children may need frequent exposure to good and challenging stories in order to become successful readers.

An objective characterization of what it is that makes one text "good" and another "bad" would be a boon to those who believe that high-quality reading materials are essential to the development of reading skills and the desire to read. It could be a criterion for selecting and designing texts that runs counter to some that are often used--for example, "Will it sell?" There are new ways of analyzing texts that may make it easier to state the contrast we feel exists between good writing and that which can be found in children's texts, workbooks, and standardized tests.

We should, of course, be cautious in defining "goodness" since a criterion of goodness may tend to support uniformity. It is thus wise to be wary of any prescriptive approach since our best writing is often that which violates conventions of goodness in imaginative ways. We also need to be aware of the function that the text is serving. What is good for one child may be less desirable for others. Nevertheless, while some texts are entertaining, informative, or challenging, many have little educational value. In order to analyze these categories, we need to identify what it is that distinguishes a story from a list of sentences.

Features of Stories

One distinguishing feature of stories is continuity. In a good story, ideas connect with one another. Connections are usually from one

sentence to the next, or from a group of sentences to some underlying schema--for instance, the plot, a character description, or the setting. (A schema is an organized collection of knowledge that we assume the reader has available to aid his or her understanding. Such schemata represent generalizations from reading many stories.) We experience discomfort in reading a novel when we can find no rationale or appropriate schemata for an episode. Imagine the discomfort for the child learning to read when s/he has to learn how to recognize new words in the context of a pseudo-story, constructed solely to introduce letter-sound correspondences!

Another distinguishing feature of stories is conflict, either within a character or between characters. As John le Carre says, "'The cat sat on the mat' is not a story. 'The cat sat on the dog's mat' is a story" (Barber, 1977). In the attempt to teach skills, we have produced a profusion of stories without conflicts, hence without the familiar structure of setting, problem, and resolution that characterizes much of literature. Without this familiar structure, which provides a scaffolding for events in stories, children may find that learning to read is a bizarre experience. Without the structure, they have no reason to continue reading a particular selection and may be learning that reading in general is pointless. Bettelheim (1975) makes a similar point with the argument that fairy tales have survived because they simplify but retain well-known conflict patterns.

-Story Analysis

There are other features of good stories, but let's focus here on connectivity and conflict. What might it mean to analyze a story with respect to them?

I will use for an example a story about a fox and a rooster, adapted from the first Winston Reader (Firman & Maltby, 1918). The story has a simple grammar and uses common words, but it is not a simple story. The reader has to work to fit all the actions together. What makes this a good story is that the reader's work is rewarded. S/he can find the connections that tie the actions to the central conflict.

The story describes a rooster and a large dog who spend the night in the woods, the rooster on a branch of a tree and the dog in the hollow of the tree. In the morning, the rooster crows and is heard by a fox. Thinking that he has just heard his breakfast, the fox looks for and finds the rooster. The story ends as follows:

> So he (the fox) said to the rooster, "What a fine rooster you are! How well you sing! Will you come to my house for breakfast?" The rooster said, "Yes, thank you, I will come, if my friend may come, too." "Oh yes," said the fox. "I will ask your friend. Where is he?" The rooster said, "My friend is in this hollow tree. He is asleep. You must wake him." Mr. Fox said to himself, "Ha! ha! I shall have two roosters for my breakfast!" So he put his head into the hollow tree. Then he said, "Will you come to my house for breakfast?" Out jumped the dog and caught Mr. Fox by the nose.

One approach to analyzing a story such as "The Fox and the Rooster" is to use a story grammar much like one uses a sentence grammar to analyze sentences. A formal grammar for sentences of English might say, in effect, that a sentence can be a noun phrase plus a verb phrase. A story grammar, on the other hand, might say that a story consists of a setting plus a number of episodes. Each episode comprises an event and a reaction to the event. Each event is either a change of state, an action, or a pair of events. Such a grammar was proposed by Rumelhart (1975) and has been used to analyze stories as well as children's understanding of stories.

Given a story grammar and a story, one can build a representation of the story. This can then be used to make predictions about what children will relate when asked to retell or summarize a story after reading it. For example, segments of the story coded as emotional responses to events may be less easily remembered than the events themselves. Similarly, actions that are deeply embedded in sub-plots are not as likely to be remembered as actions of the main plot. One can show that well-structured stories are easier for both children and adults to comprehend.

The story grammar method has an important limitation: it ignores the internal structure of the plans of characters, hence of their beliefs about actions that occur. Therefore, a complementary approach (Bruce, 1977) is briefly sketched below. It explicitly incorporates the structure of plans and beliefs by considering both the story and

the reader's understanding of events in the story. Although only one story is dealt with, the approach has been applied to others of varying quality. In addition to suggesting possible measures of story "goodness", it may have implications for testing and teaching.

Plans and Beliefs

One thing we find after examining our example story is that its elements (facts, actions, presuppositions, and so on) must be analyzed with respect to the reader because individuals have different prior beliefs and expectations about foxes, roosters, dogs, and stories. One who thinks of foxes in stories as being sly and greedy, for example, can use that knowledge in reading the story.

In order to represent beliefs of individual readers, we need to have propositions of the form: "The reader believes that roosters are good to eat." Since many of the reader's beliefs are, in turn, beliefs about beliefs of the characters, we also need to have propositions of the form: The reader believes that the fox wants the rooster to believe that the fox wants the rooster to come as a guest for breakfast (and not as the main course).

Figure 1 shows a partial and somewhat superficial analysis of part of this story. In fact, it shows only propositions that are embedded within the reader's beliefs about the fox's beliefs and wants. A complete analysis would show the reader's beliefs about the dog's and the rooster's beliefs, as well as the reader's own beliefs. Part of the interest in this story lies in the discrepancies between the reader's

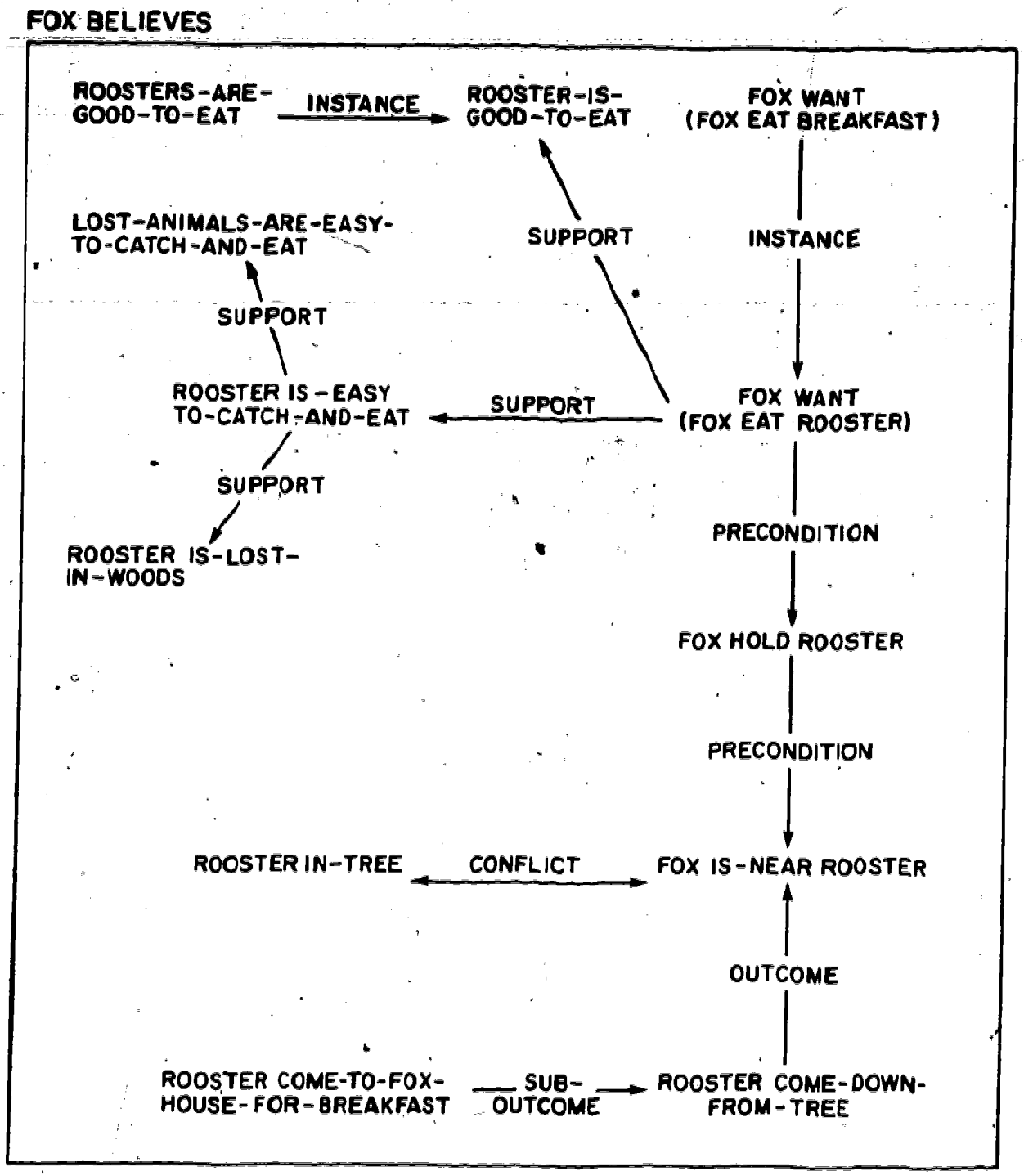

Fig. 1. An analysis in terms of plans and beliefs.

understanding of the world defined in the story, and his or her understanding of the characters' understandings. Here, it is critical for the reader to recognize differences between the fox's model (as shown in Figure 1) and the rooster's.

To take just one example of the differences in beliefs that must be understood, consider the belief (shown in Figure 1), "Rooster is-easy-to-catch-and-eat." We might hypothesize that support for this belief consists of at least the two beliefs, "lost-animals-are-easy-to-catch-and-eat" and "Rooster is-lost-in-woods." The fox's subsequent actions are most easily interpreted in terms of his belief that he can easily catch and eat the rooster. Conflict in the plot is provided by the belief that the rooster believes that he is neither lost, nor easy to catch and eat.

The fox's belief that the rooster will be easy to catch provides support for his belief that he can satisfy his top-level want, "Fox eat-breakfast." This want becomes the impetus for the fox's actions. As readers, we might imagine that he begins to formulate a plan as follows:

(1) In order to eat the rooster, he must be holding him;

(2) therefore the rooster must be near the fox;

(3) this will happen if the rooster descends from the tree;

(4) he will come down if he wants to;

(5) he will want to if he wants to join the fox for breakfast;

(6) he may want to do that if he trusts the fox and if the fox asks him nicely;

(7) the invitation will be more successful if it is accompanied by flattery.

Acting on the basis of this plan, he says,

> "What a fine rooster you are! How well you sing! Will you come to my house for breakfast?"

Note that these utterances make sense only if we recognize a plan of the sort sketched in (1)-(7) above. Furthermore, recognition of this plan reinforces a classic schema about foxes in fables, i.e., that they are clever and deceitful but, often, not clever enough. Schemata like this allow a reader to cope with the otherwise unmanageable mass of information found in stories--a mass not always appreciated by teachers.

In addition to formulating his own plans, the fox must simulate the plan formulation of the rooster in order to account for the rooster's actions. Figure 1 shows a few of the beliefs he might have about the rooster's plans. Note that, from the fox's point of view, the rooster's actions are both understandable and desirable. Thus, the fox believes his deception is working--a belief essential to the development of the plot.

Figure 1 hardly shows all of the fox's beliefs. For example, the fox could infer that the rooster's friend is a rooster from certain <u>rules of conversation</u>. His reasoning might go as follows:

(1) The friend of a rooster is a rooster (so the fox believes);

(2) a different kind of friend would be highly unusual;

(3) one should note in an utterance highly unusual, yet relevant information;

(4) without contrary indications, the rooster can be assumed to be following the rules of conversation.

The method of analysis that considers a reader's beliefs is clearly not just story analysis but, rather, story model analysis. That is, we analyze the model or picture that a "typical" reader constructs for the story. Ideally, we would like to be able to analyze a particular reader's model and compare it to other models, looking for differences in beliefs to account for different interpretations.

Children's Models

We asked several children to read this and similar stories, and then recorded their explanations for certain events in the story. One child (age 11), who happened to be a good reader, had no trouble with the story, recognizing easily the flattery and trickery aspects of the plot. He volunteered a description of a schema for foxes in stories of this type, in which the fox is seen to be greedy or villainous, plotting to gain his evil ends, ultimately tricking himself, and so on. The same child also recognized that this characterization applies not to foxes in real life, but only to foxes in stories of this type--that is, he knew that he was reading a particular kind of story, intended to be entertaining, perhaps to impart a moral, but not to persuade, inform, criticize, or any of a number of other actions an author could be performing.

A second child (age 10) had difficulty with this story, although she was able to decode every word with apparent ease. Not surprisingly, she gave little indication of knowing the fox schema mentioned above.

We can only speculate about the reasons for the different reactions; but it is clear that understanding the purpose of the story played an

important role in recognizing what higher level schemata to apply, and in understanding the story itself. One plausible hypothesis is that the second child's experience with typical pseudo-stories and her lack of exposure to good stories has given her a limited view of what stories are all about. Interviews with her on this and similar stories suggested that she might be treating them not as real stories but as the lists of sentences she had come to expect.

Comprehension Problems

No one knows the extent to which children may differ in their understanding of plans in stories, but serious comprehension difficulties may result when there is a mismatch between the understanding of a writer and those of a reader. We must recognize that an "error" in understanding may reflect differences between the reader and the writer regarding what counts as a given social action. To illustrate, the second child referred to above did not see a villain in our story, partly, because she viewed the fox as a real fox who needed to eat to live, rather than as a story fox who is almost the archetypal villain. An adequate test of reading comprehension should distinguish between a reader's skill at building a model for a text, and his or her knowledge of social roles and social behavior patterns.

Summary

Using either the story grammar approach, or the plans and goals approach, one comes to similar basic conclusions. First, real stories have structures

that can be identified and studied. Since it is a difficult task to recognize and use these structures in reading, children who have limited experience with real stories may have difficulties in understanding them. Second, good stories draw upon the reader's prior beliefs and expectations. The structure or connectivity of a story provides a framework for organizing appropriate prior beliefs. Third, the inherent complexity of story understanding, particularly the need to use prior beliefs in appropriate ways, means that there are usually several "correct" but different ways of understanding the same story. This suggests that children and adults may understand the same story in very different ways

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