

Lita Lundquist 2008. *Navigating in Foreign Language Texts*. Frederiksberg: Samfundslitteratur, 148 pages, DKK 198.00. ISBN 978-87-5931-417-3

Reading specialised texts in a foreign language is part and parcel of studying, at least in European universities. Yet few students, even those majoring in linguistics or modern languages, are instructed in how to process foreign language texts efficiently. The publication under review aims to help students with this difficult task. It does so by highlighting such common features of English, German, French and Spanish that facilitate text comprehension across these languages. This includes similarities in lexicon, sentence structure, genre conventions, as well as the means to achieve coherence. The main point made by the author is that the presence of such similarities enables the reader to apply the same reading strategies – both top-down and bottom-up – when processing specialised texts in each of the languages involved. This should encourage students to exploit the features shared by their native language and foreign language rather than focus on differences. The objective of *Navigating in Foreign Language Texts* is, therefore, essentially didactic. Accordingly, we will examine to what extent the publication can achieve its aim.

The book under review consists of three parts, each comprising two chapters, as well as a reference section and an index. Parts I and II deal, respectively, with top-down and bottom-up reading strategies. Part III demonstrates how both kinds of strategies complement each other and presents two computer programs designed to help students consciously develop their text comprehension skills. The logical organisation of the book makes it easy to follow and ensures continuity between its constituent parts. Random access to the contents is facilitated by the index at the end of the book. It could, perhaps, be enhanced by a slightly more fortunate choice of headings and titles: the title of the book looks, especially to a non-linguist, almost identical to that of Chapter 3 (“Reading texts in a foreign language”) and of Part I (“Comprehending text in a foreign language. Top-down processes”).

In Chapter 1 the author presents some basic facts about knowledge, its organisation in our brains, and the way it is built on the basis of the information included in the texts we read. We become familiar with such processes as constructing mental models or activating and building knowledge frames. We are alerted to the signals through which writers assert information and presuppose that their readers possess the background knowledge necessary to understand the text. When we read texts in our native language, these processes operate outside our consciousness. The author makes us aware of them and demonstrates how this awareness can contribute to better comprehension of foreign language texts. Having read this chapter, we are equipped with the toolkit necessary for the understanding of the subsequent parts of the book.

Chapter 2 offers a description of top-down procedures for creating meaningful expectations towards the contents and structure of a text. These include reliance on contextual data and correct recognition of genre, discourse and text type. The author also illustrates how these procedures can be applied in practice to form an ‘interpretation program’ (p. 41) for a text, i.e. a coherent expectation frame, which both controls the interpretation of the text, and is itself revised in the course of the reading process. The presentation of these top-down procedures is clear, convincing and supported by ample relevant examples, especially in the description of the various text types. In two respects, however, it could be improved. First, the definitions of some key terms could be made more precise. Genre, for example, is defined as “a set of repeated patterns, formed by cultural conventions” (p. 30). Such explication of the term appears rather enigmatic to us, as it probably would to a non-expert student using the publication for didactic purposes. Second, more explicit advice on how to recognise specific genres and types of discourse would be of considerable help to students. As regards the latter, on pages 31-32 the author introduces the rather complicated model of social subsystems, with all its parameters, which “can be utilised carefully as guidelines especially in detecting values and standards, ideals and motives underlying the text”. This is true, but we are not informed about (1) how to ascribe specific values to given parameters, nor (2) how

to utilise these parameters with regard to a particular text.

As regards the bottom-up reading strategies, in Chapter 3 the author demonstrates how effective parsing of sentences can contribute to a more efficient processing of specialised texts. We learn how the ability to identify the obligatory clause constituents, such as the subject, the verb, and, if any, the objects and adverbials, makes us recognise discourse referents and predications related to them, and, by extension, construct a mental model of the text. Plenty of clear and well-chosen examples are provided to help us grasp the point made by the author. In most cases, however, these are subject-verb-object sentences, which are rather easy to parse for speakers of Indo-European languages. Perhaps more attention should have been given to complex sentences with a marked constituent order. They cause more difficulties to the reader and are prevalent in academic and specialised texts, which the students using the book under review inevitably come across. A significant part of the chapter is devoted to the identification of verb frames (i.e. patterns of complementation) in order to determine sentence structure. We learn that this reading strategy works both bottom-up and top-down, though the author focuses mainly on the former, providing a wealth of examples and subjecting them to a systematic analysis. A word of warning should, perhaps, have been offered here about the obvious limitation of identifying verb frames as a top-down reading strategy: many verbs, e.g. *run*, *drive* or *feel* have several frames; as a result, the reader's anticipation about the number of arguments to be found in the sentence might not be correct.

While Chapter 3 focuses on bottom-up reading strategies relying on the reader's knowledge of syntax, Chapter 4 deals with strategies for decoding words and unpacking information from propositions to comprehend a text effectively. Reliance on the recognition of cognates or shared loanwords (usually neo-Latinate or Greek coinages) in order to decode words in foreign language texts is undeniably a useful bottom-up strategy, and an important point is made in the book to demonstrate lexical similarities between English, French and Spanish. We wonder, however, why the relatively small degree of similarity between English and German vocabulary is attributed to the fact that German belongs to the family of Germanic languages (p. 79). Since English belongs to the same family, the explanation based on genetic criteria is simply not valid. (To be fair, we admit on the other hand that such issues are probably of secondary importance to the prospective reader, who would be more interested in similarities across languages rather than in possible reasons for their absence.) Commenting on potential lexical difficulties that readers of English specialised texts might experience, the author mentions the significant fact that expert vocabulary is often too abstract and hard to understand for a non-expert (or not-yet-expert) reader. In our view, this problem deserves more comprehensive coverage, which would offer some possible solutions to it. Likewise, we would welcome more instruction in how to identify foregrounded and backgrounded information, as well as subjectivity in a text. We believe it to be a very important skill, as it not only enables the reader to comprehend a text but also analyse it.

In Chapter 5 the author introduces coherence and demonstrates how it can be used as a reading strategy. This is done in three stages. The first one deals with local coherence by argument overlap and thematic progression. Its use as a reading strategy is illustrated with relevant examples from all the four languages involved. Special attention is paid to the difficulty which unfaithful and summarising anaphors cause to the reader. The problem is real and is well-exemplified in the book under review, but we would also welcome a proposal of a viable strategy for coping with it. The same applies to the issue discussed in the next part of the chapter, viz. logical and coherence relations. We definitely agree with the author that inferring such relations from a text devoid of logical connectors is difficult for the reader. We would expect, therefore, to learn here how to tackle this difficulty (in a more predictable way than relying on one's background knowledge). The examples provided to illustrate the problem show where to look for coherence relations but not how to identify them correctly. Much more effective is the presentation of coherence paths in various text types, which includes clear instruction in how to spot linguistic and discourse signals of coherence in each text type discussed. One could only wish that examples in French, Spanish

and German had been given alongside those in English. The chapter ends with a brief summary of reading strategies mentioned in the book. The strategies are presented as a set of instructions and mentioned in the order of suggested application. Thus, the list can serve as a condensed manual in reading foreign language texts (provided one has read the book under review).

The final chapter contains an introduction to the use of two computer programs designed by the author and her colleagues to help students develop their text comprehension skills: TeXtRay and NaviLire. The former helps students practice reading texts in natural reading units, writing texts from dictation, and parsing sentences. The latter helps the user learn to navigate along specific paths of coherence in a given text. Both programs also constitute a valuable resource for teachers. TeXtRay can be used for devising various writing exercises, such as writing under constraints. NaviLire enables teachers to create exercises based on the (types of) texts used in class. A brief description of this function would not be amiss in the book; students could also appreciate it when creating exercises for their peers.

Having read *Navigating in Foreign Language Texts* we have reached the following conclusion: the book has its distinctive strengths but, for several reasons, is not suitable for just any student. First of all, we find it rather remarkable that the native language of the prospective user of the book is not specified, especially that one of the chief objectives of the publication is to “teach students how to take advantage of features that are shared between their native and foreign language” (back cover). Surely these features are not the same for, e.g. Chinese and Danish readers of a text in English, and this must affect the choice and application of reading strategies. If the book, as could be supposed from the comments on its origin included in the preface, is aimed at Danish readers, this fact could have been exploited more effectively. Explicit references could have been made, where relevant, to similarities between Danish and the languages dealt with in the publication. Second, in order to be able to fully exploit the advantages of the book, a fair command of French, Spanish, and German is required (ditto English, but this goes without saying). A beginner in French would not make much of the examples of French texts (but then, of course they should not be asked to read specialised texts in this language to begin with). Third, to understand how the reading strategies based on sentence analysis work, the reader must possess a fair knowledge of grammatical theory. This means that few students majoring in other disciplines than linguistics and/or modern languages would be able to use the book without guidance. But even though the book is not as universal as its first pages lead the reader to expect, our overall impression of it is positive. *Navigating in Foreign Language Texts* aims to offer assistance where it is much needed, and, by focusing on similarities rather than differences between languages, it tries to simplify the reading process instead of making it more complicated. Moreover, it exploits the advances of modern technology, introducing the reader to free, Internet-based software designed to strengthen text comprehension skills. We are happy to recommend the publication in its present form, and we are convinced that it deserves an enlarged edition with more examples and exercises as well as more explicit instruction. If such an edition ever appears, it should be made obligatory reading in preparatory courses for university studies.

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