

Discourse Analysis in EFL Learning-A Case Study

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Abstract

In this paper we examine the role of Discourse Analysis (DA) in English and a Foreign Language (EFL) Learning. We focus on and apply three questions in DA, i.e. what are the relations between sentences, paragraphs and information chunks; what kind of cohesive devices are adopted for the coherence; and how the topic is developed. It is suggested that well understanding of devices in semantic relations such as matching and logical sequence relations, grammatical connectives, lexical signaling devices, repetition, paraphrases and questions to clarify the clause relations, as well as a structural analysis at both global and local levels is most helpful to a successful EFL learning. Some implications on discourse analysis in EFL learning is further given in the concluding part.

Keywords: Discourse Analysis; English as a Foreign Language; Cohesive Device; Semantic Relation; Global Structure

1. Introduction

Daily speech is made up of millions of small linguistic units, from morphemes to words and phrases. However, it is through discourse that we can get a panoramic view of how these small units are combined and organized to convey meaning and thus lead to successful communication.

Discourse, defined by Hoey (1983:15), is any stretch of spoken or written language that is felt as complete in itself. Starting from Cook (1989), the employment of discourse analysis (*DA*) has been given more and more attention in a successful *EFL* (English as a Foreign Language) environment (e.g. McCarthy, 1991; Massi, 2001; Wallace, 2003; Ivanov, 2009). Celce-Murcia & Olshtain (2000: 7) lay much emphasis on five areas of *DA*, i.e. cohesion, coherence, information structure, turn-taking and critical discourse analysis, in *EFL* reading. We agree with Fairclough (2003:3-4), however, that “textually oriented discourse analysis”, rather than the absolute “critical analysis”, is of indispensable interest in language learning. Therefore, we focus on and apply three questions in *DA*, i.e. what are the relations between sentences, paragraphs and information chunks; what kind of cohesive devices are adopted for the coherence; and how is the topic developed, in the current case study.

The material used for analysis (see appendix) is selected from *New Horizon English Course* (Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, Beijing, 2003 1st edition; 2011 2nd edition), a course book aiming to develop college students’ active language learning, under the *National Teaching Scheme* within the broad *Eleventh Five-Year Plan of China*. In the coming parts, firstly, some devices in semantic relations such as matching and logical sequence relations, grammatical connectives, lexical signaling devices, repetition, paraphrases and questions to clarify the clause relations within the selected passage are reviewed in detail. Then the example text is divided into three parts on a global level, where the inter- and intra-relations between these parts are examined. Finally there will be simple reflection on discourse analysis in second language learning and teaching.

2. Devices in semantic relations

A way to tackle the problem of describing discourse organization has been to “treat discourse as in some way the product of semantic relations holding between sentences or propositions.” (Hoey, 1983:17). Therefore, the main purpose of *DA* is to clarify the relations between clauses. A clause relation, defined by Winter (1977) is the cognitive process whereby we interpret the meaning of a sentence or group of sentences in the light of its adjoining sentence or group of sentences. Hoey (1983; 1991) divided clause relations into two broad classes of relation——logical sequence relations and matching relations.

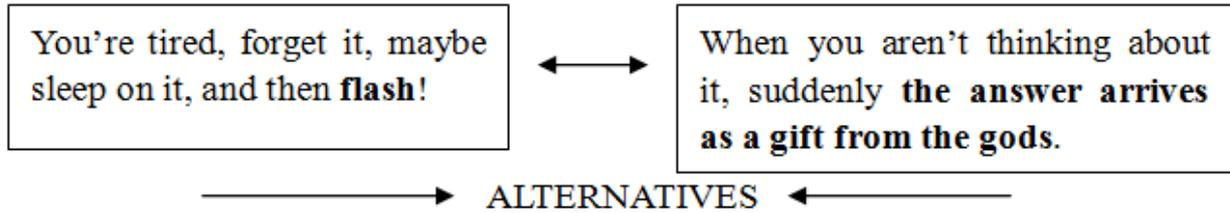
2.1. Matching relations

Matching relations refer to “relations where statements are ‘matched’ against each other in terms of degrees of identity of description.” (Hoey, 1983:20). There are two types of matching relations: matching relations of compatibility and matching relations of contrast/incompatibility.

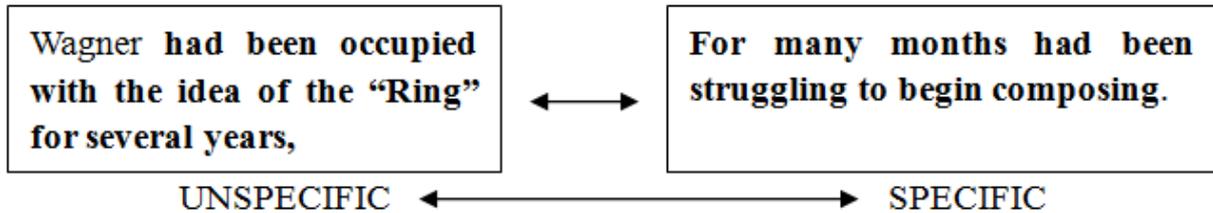
2.1.1. Matching relations of compatibility

The relationship of matching shows high degree of repetition between clauses. Compatibility and incompatibility differ in semantic relations between clauses, in which matching relation of compatibility shows semantic similarities. It includes relations of general-particular, general-exemplification, unspecific-specific, comparisons, alternatives, etc. For example:

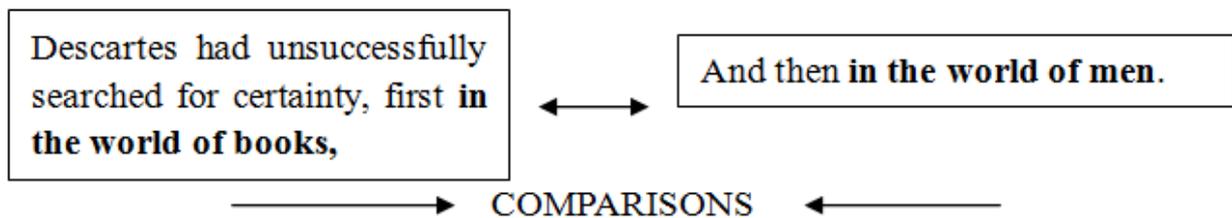
1). you're tired, forget it, maybe sleep on it, and then flash! When you aren't thinking about it, suddenly the answer arrives as a gift from the gods. (Para. 1)



2). Wagner had been occupied with the idea of the "Ring" for several years, and for many months had been struggling to begin composing. (Para. 4)



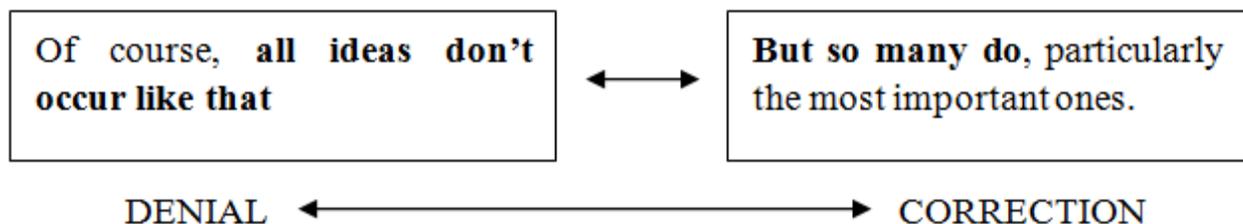
3). Descartes had unsuccessfully searched for certainty, first in the world of books, and then in the world of men. (Para. 6)



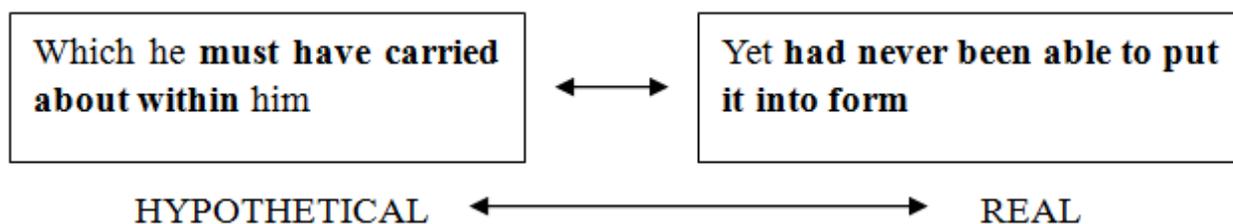
2.1.2. Matching relations of incompatibility

While matching relation of compatibility shows semantic similarities between clauses, matching relation of incompatibility tells the difference(s) in semantic relations. It includes relations of contrasts, contradiction, hypothetical-real, denial-correction, etc., as shown in 4)-7):

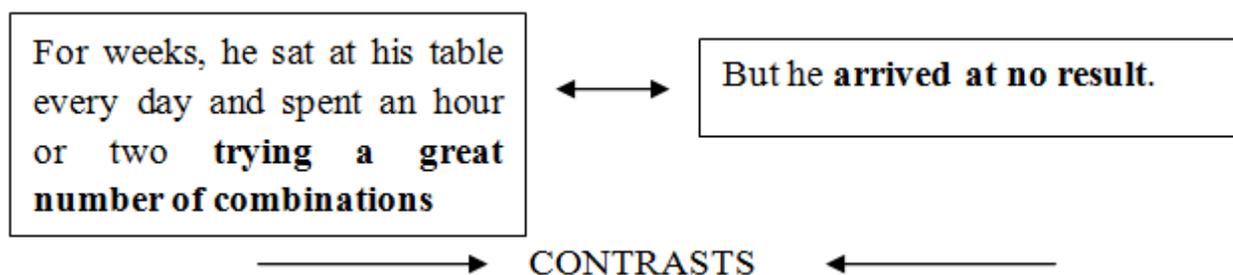
4). Of course, all ideas don't occur like that but so many do, particularly the most important ones. (Para. 2)



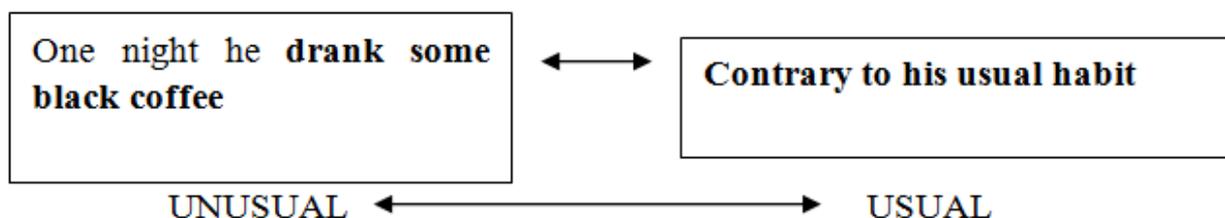
5). which he must have carried about within him yet had never been able to put it into form (Para. 4)



6). For weeks, he sat at his table every day and spent an hour or two trying a great number of combinations but he arrived at no result. (Para. 5)



7). One night he drank some black coffee, contrary to his usual habit (Para.5)



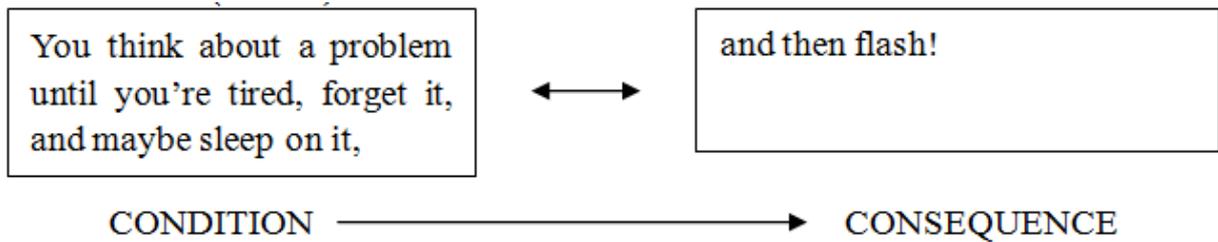
2.2. Logical sequence relations

Logical sequence relations are relations between successive events or ideas, whether actual or potential, the most basic form of this relation being time sequence. (Hoey, 1983:20). Apart from time sequence relations, two types of logical sequence relations are found in the example text, i.e. logical sequence of condition-consequence and cause-consequence.

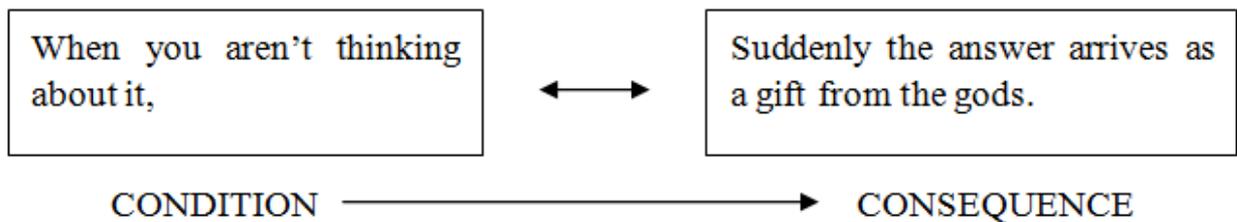
2.2.1. Logical sequence of condition-consequence

In relationship of condition-consequence the subordinate clause is the condition and the main clause the consequence, or vice versa, as illustrated in 8)-11):

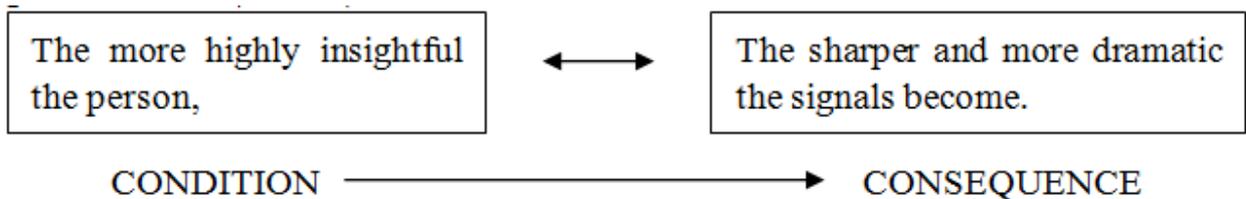
8). you think about a problem until you're tired, forget it, maybe sleep on it, and then flash!
(Para. 1)



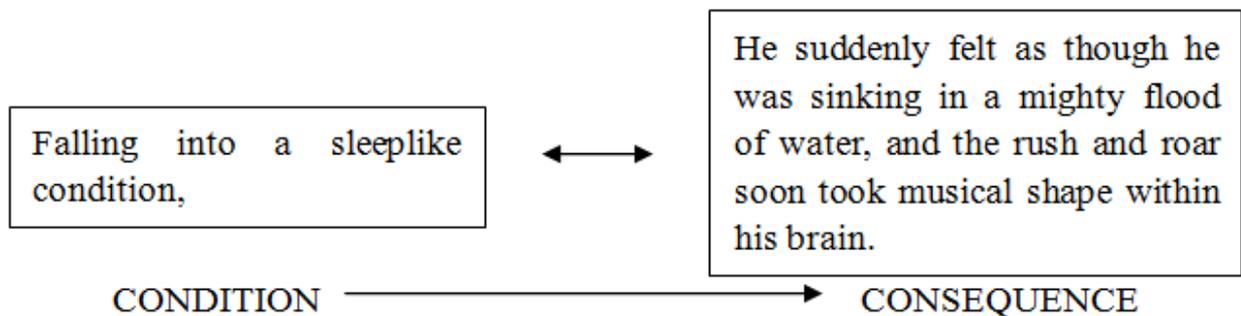
9). When you aren't thinking about it, suddenly the answer arrives as a gift from the gods.
(Para.1)



10). the more highly insightful the person, the sharper and more dramatic the signals become.
(Para. 3)



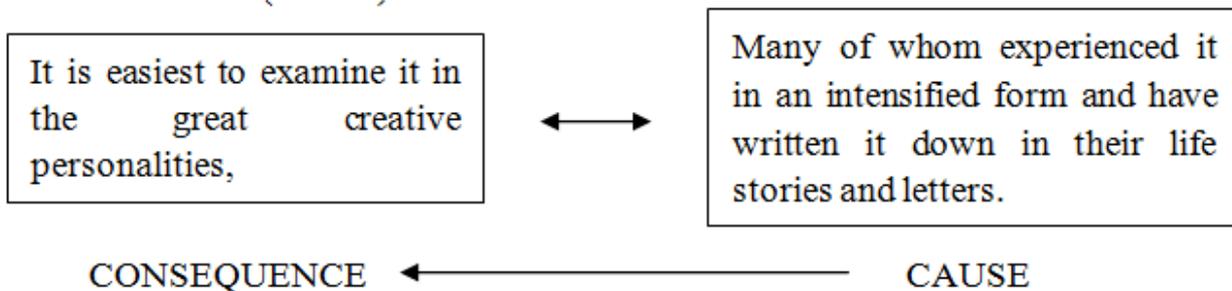
11). Falling into a sleeplike condition, he suddenly felt as though he was sinking in a mighty flood of water, and the rush and roar soon took musical shape within his brain. (Para. 4)



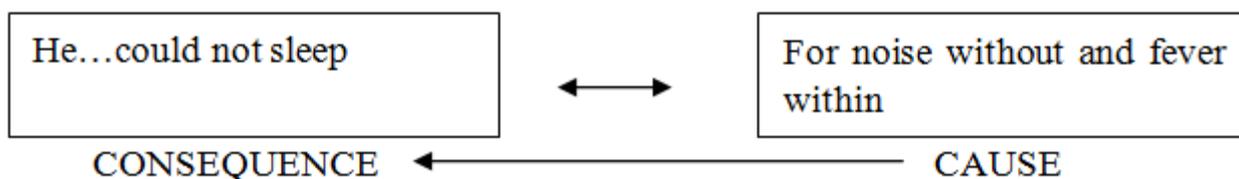
2.2.2. Cause-Consequence

As that of condition-consequence, in cause-consequence relations, the main clause is the consequence and the subordinate clause the cause, or vice versa. For example the cause-consequence relations shown in 12)-15):

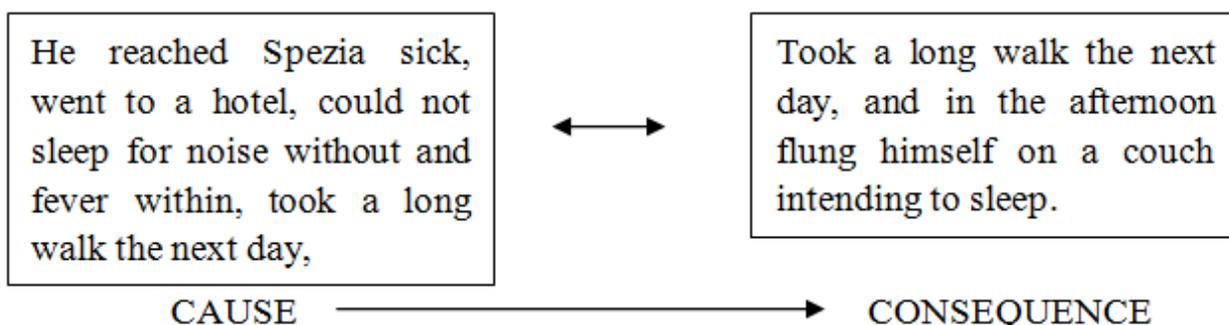
12). it is easiest to examine it in the great creative personalities, many of whom experienced it in an intensified form and have written it down in their life stories and letters. (Para. 2)



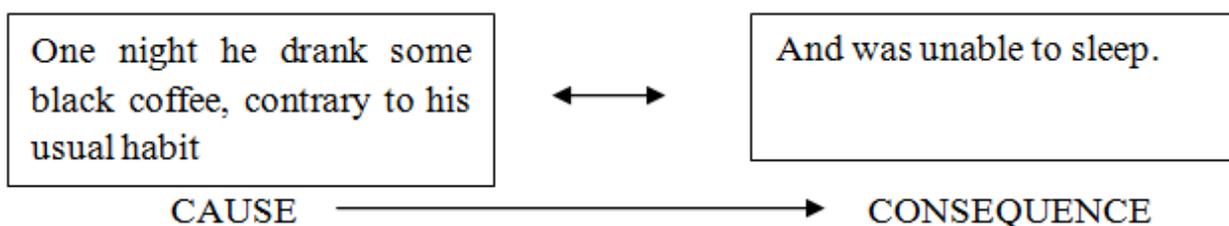
13). he...could not sleep for noise without and fever within (Para. 4)



14). he reached Spezia sick, went to a hotel, could not sleep for noise without and fever within, took a long walk the next day, and in the afternoon flung himself on a couch intending to sleep. (Para. 4)



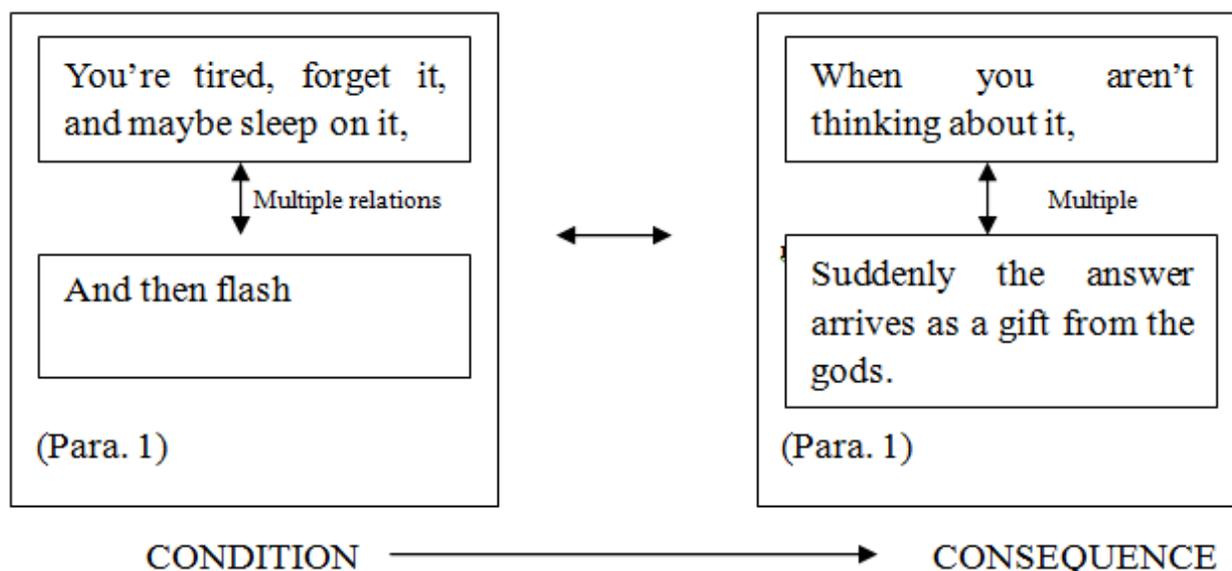
15). One night he drank some black coffee, contrary to his usual habit, and was unable to sleep. (Para. 5)



2.3. Multiple clause relation

The characteristics of multiple clause relation are that both matching and logical sequence relations are present in the same clause pair. Take the following sentences in Paragraph One for example:

16). you're tired, forget it, maybe sleep on it, and then flash! When you aren't thinking about it, suddenly the answer arrives as a gift from the gods.



Here, “you’re tired, forget it, maybe sleep on it” and “When you aren’t thinking about it” are conditions for “flash” and “the answer arrives as a gift from the gods” as consequences, while in each block we can feel the relation of time sequence. The sentence “you’re tired, forget it, maybe sleep on it” gives examples of how “you aren’t thinking about it”, thus the relationship between them is of matching relation of general-exemplification, while “flash” in the sentence “and then flash” is the alternative of “the answer arrives as a gift from the gods”. Therefore, the relationship between the two sentences is of multiple clause relation, with matching relation of compatibility of general-exemplification and alternatives in between and logical sequence of condition-consequence inside each.

3. Cohesive devices

Lexical and grammatical relationship can always be found within a clause/sentence or a text. It is grammatical/lexical links, which make a sentence, or a text, meaningful, and which are defined as core devices in keeping the sentence/text cohesive and/or coherent (Halliday & Hasan 1976; Halliday, 1985).

3.1. Grammatical connectives

A clause relation, therefore, can be signaled by not few of grammatical connectives. In the text concerned in this study, there are extensive examples of such connectives showing relations of denial, reason, concession, time sequence and comparison.

3.1.1. Relation of denial

17). Of course, all ideas don’t occur like that **but** so many do, particularly the most important ones. (Para. 2)

18). All of us have experienced this sudden arrival of a new idea, **but** it is easiest to examine it in the great creative personalities, many of whom experienced it in an intensified form and have written it down in their life stories and letters. (Para. 3)

19). He recognized that the orchestral opening to the “Rhinegold”, which he must have carried about within him **yet** had never been able to put it into form, had at last taken its shape within him. (Para. 4)

10). For weeks, he sat at his table every day and spent an hour or two trying a great number of combinations **but** he arrived at no result. (Para. 5)

21). The unconscious is certainly the source of instinctive activity. **But** in creative thought the unconscious is responsible for the production of new organized forms from relatively disorganized elements. (Para. 7)

3.1.2. Relation of reason

22). This is reasonable, **for** psychologists use this term to describe mental processes, which are unknown to the individual. (Para. 2)

23). he...could not sleep **for** noise without and fever within (Para. 4)

3.1.3. Relation of concession

24). One can draw examples from genius in any field, from religion, philosophy, and literature to art and music, even in mathematics, science, and technical invention, **although** these are often thought to depend only on logic and experiment. (Para. 3)

3.1.4. Relation of time sequence

25). You think about a problem **until** you're tired, forget it, maybe sleep on it, and **then** flash! (Para. 1)

26). **When** you aren't thinking about it, suddenly the answer arrives as a gift from the gods. (Para. 1)

27). he could almost feel them pushing against one another, **until** two of them combined to form a stable combination. (Para. 5)

28). Descartes had unsuccessfully searched for certainty, **first** in the world of books, and **then** in the world of men. **Then** in a dream on November 10, 1619, he made the significant discovery that he could only find certainty in his own thoughts, cogito ergo sum ("I think; therefore, I exist"). (Para. 6)

3.1.5. Relation of comparison

29). Here, we see the conscious mind observing the new combinations being formed in the unconscious, while the Wagner story shows the sudden explosion of a new concept into consciousness. (Para. 5)

3.2. Lexical signaling

On the other hand, Lexical signaling not only signals the relations that hold between the sentences in a paragraph, they also signal the organization of larger passages and whole discourses (Hoey, 1983: 24). Also, the passage selected under examination is not in short of lexical signaling devices.

3.2.1. Lexical signaling of comparative degrees

30). the **more highly insightful** the person, the **sharper** and **more dramatic** the signals become. (Para. 3)

3.2.2. Lexical signaling of examples

31). One can draw **examples** from genius in any field (Para. 3)

3.2.3. Lexical signaling of contrastive

32). One night he drank some black coffee, **contrary** to his usual habit (Para. 5)

3.2.4. Lexical signaling of lexical realization

33). you're **tired, forget it, maybe sleep on it...you aren't thinking about it** (Para.1)

34). One can draw **examples** from genius in any field, from **religion, philosophy, and literature** to **art and music**, even in **mathematics, science, and technical invention** (Para. 3)

3.3. Repetition

According to Hoey (1983:25) repetition is a way of “opening out” a sentence so that its lexical uniqueness may be used as the basis for providing further, related information. Repetitive devices could be of lexical forms or pro-forms; they could also be co-referential or zero elliptic.

3.3.1. Simple lexical repetition

35). Descartes had unsuccessfully searched for certainty, first **in the world of books**, and then **in the world of men**. (Para. 6)

3.3.2. Pro-forms

Devices of Pro-forms can be realized by the noun of “ones” as a substitution item, as in 36); or by pronouns counted as repetitions, as shown in 37); or demonstratives counted as repetition as illustrated in 38):

36). Of course, all **ideas** don't occur like that but so many do, particularly the most important **ones**. (Para. 2)

37). You think about a **problem** until you're tired, forget **it**, maybe sleep on **it**, and then flash! (Para. 1)

38). One can draw **examples** from genius in any field, from religion, philosophy, and literature to art and music, even in mathematics, science, and technical invention, although **these** are often thought to depend only on logic and experiment. (Para. 3)

3.3.3. Co-reference

Co-references are two separate expressions referring to the same item.

39). As a contrast, we may consider a famous story: the discovery by **Henri Poincare, the great French mathematician** (Para. 5)

3.3.4. Ellipsis-zero substitution

40). Of course, all ideas don't **occur** like that but so many **do** (Para. 2)

3.4. Paraphrases

Paraphrase is another effective way, though not much overtly used, to achieve textual coherence. For example:

41). In this example, **the conscious mind at the moment of creation** knew nothing of the actual processes by which the solution was found. (Para. 4) ...the Wagner story shows **the sudden explosion of a new concept into consciousness**. (Para. 5)

3.5. Asking questions

Apart from the devices discussed above, “a number of types of question may be used to clarify the organization of discourse” (Hoey, 1983:28).

42). No satisfactory way exists to explain how to form a good idea. (Para. 1)

Questions:

What kinds of ways are satisfactory to explain how to form a good idea?

Why there is no satisfactory way exists to explain how to form a good idea?

...

Also monologues can be converted into Question-Answer forms:

43). This is reasonable, for psychologists use this term to describe mental processes (Para.2)

D¹: This is reasonable

Q: Why?

D: for psychologists use this term to describe mental processes

44). One night he drank some black coffee, contrary to his usual habit, and was unable to sleep.
(Para. 5)

D: One night he drank some black coffee, contrary to his usual habit

Q: What about the consequence?

D: (he) was unable to sleep.

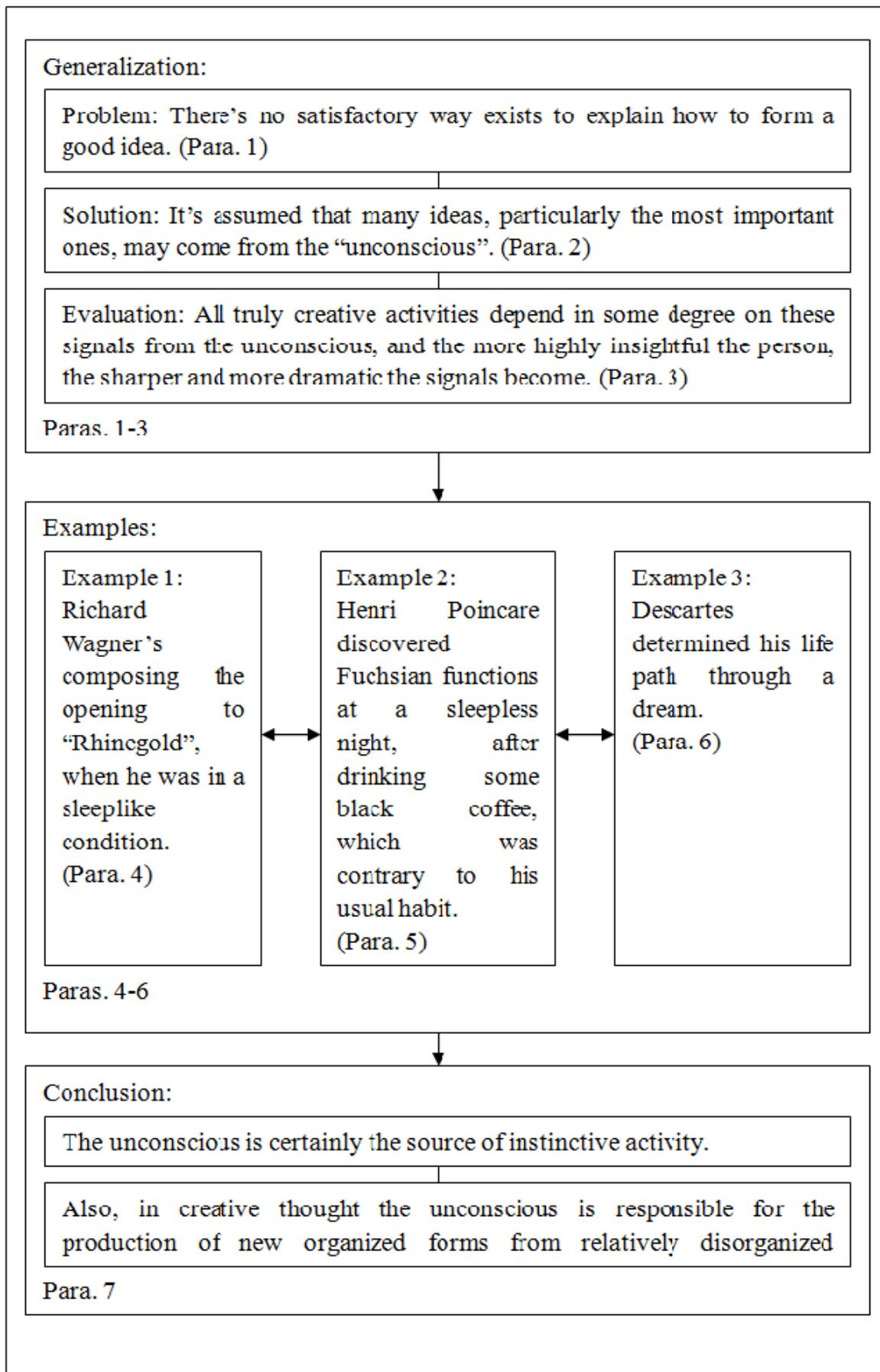
4. Text Structural Analysis

The selected passage focuses on one central theme: “unconscious” may be the source for many important ideas. The characteristic writing technique that runs throughout the reading passage, on a global level, is a general-particular pattern (Figure 1). While, on the local level, the generalization in Part 1 and the three examples in Part 2 follow, respectively, a problem-solution pattern. The whole passage can be divided into 3 parts:

Part 1 consists of Paragraph 1, Paragraph 2 and Paragraph 3. This part is the generalization of the passage: the birth of bright ideas, i.e. where do bright ideas come from. And the part itself follows a problem-solution pattern. Paragraph 1 states the problem that there is no satisfactory way exists to explain how to form a good idea. Good ideas come within a flash as a gift from the gods. Paragraph 2 puts forward a possible solution to the problem: many good ideas, particularly the most important ones, may come from the “unconscious”. Then Paragraph 3 gives evaluation that all truly creative activities depend, in some extent, on these signals from the unconscious, and the more highly insightful the person, the sharper and more dramatic the signals become.

¹ Here, D stands for the original discourse and Q stands for the posited question.

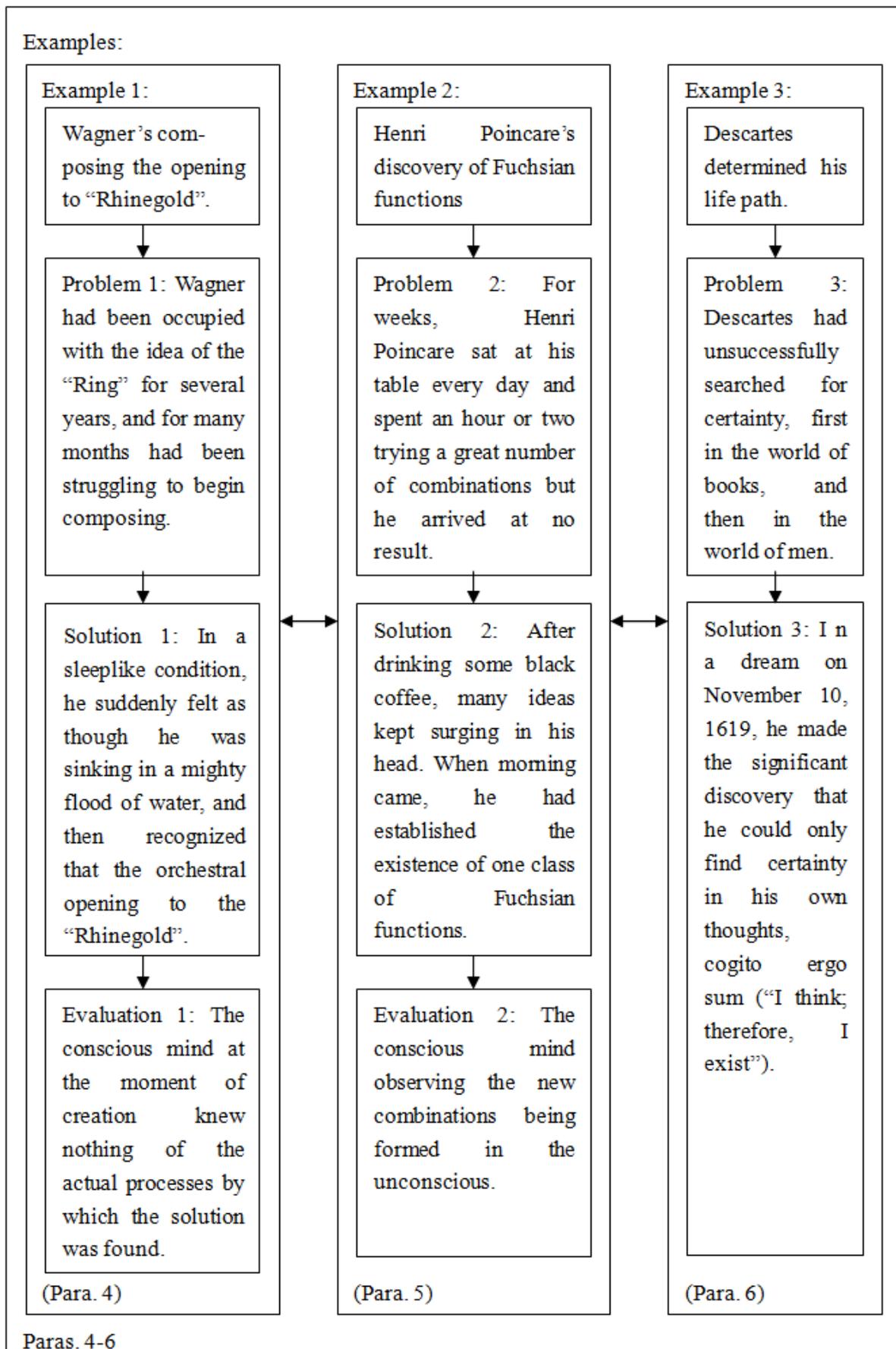
Figure 1: Global analysis of the whole passage



Part 2 offers three types of examples to show how do bright ideas come from the “unconscious”. This part is made up of three paragraphs, from Paragraph 4 to Paragraph 6. Paragraph 4 is the first example of Richard Wagner’s composition of the opening to “Rhinégold”, in a sleeplike condition of unconsciousness. Paragraph 5 tells us another example: Henri Poincaré discovered Fuchsian functions at a sleepless night, after drinking some black coffee, which was contrary to his usual habit. This example is slightly different from that of Wagner’s, for actually it was Henri’s conscious mind that watched the unconscious at work. Paragraph 6 offers a third type of example that Descartes determined his life path through a dream.

On the other hand, when we examine these three examples on a local level (Figure 2), we would find that, respectively, each example follows a problem-solution pattern. In Wagner’s example, at the beginning of Paragraph 4, there’s the problem: Wagner had been occupied with the idea of the “Ring” for several years, and for many months had been struggling to begin composing. And in Spezia, after a long walk and for the fever within, Wagner was falling into a sleeplike condition and suddenly felt as though he was sinking in a mighty flood of water, and the rush and roar soon took musical shape within his brain. He recognized the orchestral opening to the “Rhinégold”. Sleeplike conditions of unconsciousness—that is the solution to the problem. Then the end of paragraph gives an evaluation of the story that the conscious mind at the moment of creation knew nothing of the actual processes by which the solution was found i.e. solution came totally from the unconscious. In the second example, also, Henri Poincaré encountered the similar problem: for weeks, he sat at his table every day and spent an hour or two trying a great number of combinations but he arrived at no result. Contrary to Wagner’s sleeplike condition, Henri was unable to sleep after drinking some black coffee, and many ideas kept surging in his head. When the morning came, he had established the existence of one class of Fuchsian functions. And the solution is evaluated as the conscious mind observing the new combinations being formed in the unconscious. Finally it is the story of Descartes. His problem is that he had unsuccessfully searched for certainty, first in the world of books, and then in the world of men. However, he found the solution through a dream: on November 10, 1619, he made the significant discovery that he could only find certainty in his own thoughts, *cogito ergo sum* (“I think; therefore, I exist”).

Figure 2: Local analysis of Part 2



Part 3 is Paragraph 7—the last paragraph, which summarizes the three examples of forming bright ideas from the unconscious. Finally it gives a conclusion that the unconscious is not only the source of instinctive activity, but also responsible for the production of new organized forms from relatively disorganized elements.

Again, the whole passage follows a general-particular pattern with Part 1 as a generalization, Part 2 of three examples and Part 3 as the conclusion. Meanwhile, in Part 1, the generalization itself follows a problem-solution pattern with Paragraph 1 as the problem and Paragraph 2 and Paragraph 3 as the solution and evaluation. Also, the three examples follow a problem-solution pattern respectively, while the problems and evaluations in each example occur in a logical-sequence relation of both time sequence and condition-consequence. Since the paragraphs in Part 2 are different examples of Part 1, there are more differences than similarities, thus the relationship between Paragraph 4, Paragraph 5 and Paragraph 6 is the matching relation of incompatibility. Finally, the clause relation within the passage is a multiple one, i.e. we could find both matching and logical sequence relations.

5. Implication and Conclusion

Today most of us aware that even with the most communicative approaches, a second language classroom in China is limited in its ability to develop learners' communicative competence in the target language. This is possibly due to the restricted number of contact hours with the target language, or the minimal opportunities to interact with native speakers. EFL teachers, therefore, are suggested to use discourse analytic techniques to investigate the interaction patterns in their classrooms to see how these patterns promote or hinder opportunities for learners to practice the target language. This process allows language teachers to study their own teaching behavior—specifically, the frequency, distribution, and types of questions they use and their effect on students' responses. By analyzing students' discourse teachers can study the communication patterns in different classroom activities, such as student-to-student interactions during a paired role-play task and during a small-group cooperative learning activity. Thus they are likely to discover that students produce different speech patterns in response to different tasks.

Also discourse analysis of classroom interactions will shed light on cross-cultural linguistic patterns that may lead to communicative difficulties. For example, some speakers may engage in overlapping speaking while someone else is taking a turn-at-talk. For some linguistic groups, this discourse behavior can be interpreted as a signal of engagement and involvement; however, other speakers may view it as an interruption and imposition on their speaking rights. Thus teachers can use discourse analysis to study cross-cultural interactions in their classrooms, which will help students identify different communication strategies and their potential for miscommunication.

Anyway, learners should always be the subjects in language learning. Apart from teacher' instructions, students can use the tool of discourse analysis to study language by themselves, i.e. to make themselves discourse analysts. By exploring natural language uses in authentic environments, such as watching videos and listening to the radio in the target language or practicing the language with native speakers, learners can gain a greater appreciation and understanding of the discourse patterns associated with a given genre or speech event as well as the sociolinguistic factors that contribute to linguistic variation across settings and contexts. Students are encouraged to collect and analyze data themselves. Once collected, sets of authentic language data can be repeatedly examined for other conversational features, then later compared to discourse features found in other speech events. This discourse approach to language learning removes language from the confines of textbooks and makes it tangible, so that students can explore language as interaction rather than as grammatical units. Also, teachers can use these activities to raise students' awareness of language variation, dialect differences, and cultural diversity.

In sum, EFL teachers can use discourse analysis not only as a research method for investigation of their own teaching practices but also a tool to study interactions among language learners, while learners can in turn benefit from using discourse analysis to explore what language is and how it is used to achieve communicative success in different contexts. Therefore, discourse analysis can help to create a second language-learning environment that much precisely reflects how language is used and encourages learners toward their goal of communicative proficiency in the target language.

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Appendix

Birth of Bright Ideas

Para. 1 No satisfactory way exists to explain how to form a good idea. You think about a problem until you're tired, forget it, maybe sleep on it, and then flash! When you aren't thinking about it, suddenly the answer arrives as a gift from the gods.

Para. 2 Of course, all ideas don't occur like that but so many do, particularly the most important ones. They burst into the mind, glowing with the heat of creation. How they do it is a mystery, but they must come from somewhere. Let's assume they come from the "unconscious". This is reasonable, for psychologists use this term to describe mental processes, which are unknown to the individual. Creative thought depends on what was unknown becoming known.

Para. 3 All of us have experienced this sudden arrival of a new idea, but it is easiest to examine it in the great creative personalities, many of whom experienced it in an intensified form and have written it down in their life stories and letters. One can draw examples from genius in any field, from religion, philosophy, and literature to art and music, even in mathematics, science, and technical invention, although these are often thought to depend only on logic and experiment. All truly creative activities depend in some degree on these signals from the unconscious, and the more highly insightful the person, the sharper and more dramatic the signals become.

Para. 4 Take the example of Richard Wagner composing the opening to "Rhinegold". Wagner had been occupied with the idea of the "Ring" for several years, and for many months had been struggling to begin composing. On September 4, 1853, he reached Spezia sick, went to a hotel, could not sleep for noise without and fever within, took a long walk the next day, and in the afternoon flung himself on a couch intending to sleep. Then at last the miracle happened for which his unconscious

mind had been seeking for so long. Falling into a sleeplike condition, he suddenly felt as though he was sinking in a mighty flood of water, and the rush and roar soon took musical shape within his brain. He recognized that the orchestral opening to the “Rhinégold”, which he must have carried about within him yet had never been able to put it into form, had at last taken its shape within him. In this example, the conscious mind at the moment of creation knew nothing of the actual processes by which the solution was found.

Para. 5 As a contrast, we may consider a famous story: the discovery by Henri Poincaré, the great French mathematician, of a new mathematical method called the Fuchsian functions. Here we see the conscious mind, in a person of highest ability, actually watching the unconscious at work. For weeks, he sat at his table every day and spent an hour or two trying a great number of combinations but he arrived at no result. One night he drank some black coffee, contrary to his usual habit, and was unable to sleep. Many ideas kept surging in his head; he could almost feel them pushing against one another, until two of them combined to form a stable combination. When morning came, he had established the existence of one class of Fuchsian functions. He had only to prove the results, which took only a few hours. Here, we see the conscious mind observing the new combinations being formed in the unconscious, while the Wagner story shows the sudden explosion of a new concept into consciousness.

Para. 6 A third type of creative experience is exemplified by the dreams which came to Descartes at the age of twenty-three and determined his life path. Descartes had unsuccessfully searched for certainty, first in the world of books, and then in the world of men. Then in a dream on November 10, 1619, he made the significant discovery that he could only find certainty in his own thoughts, cogito ergo sum (“I think; therefore, I exist”). This dream filled him with intense religious enthusiasm.

Para. 7 Wagner’s, Poincaré’s, and Descartes’ experiences are representative of countless others in every field of culture. The unconscious is certainly the source of instinctive activity. But in creative thought the unconscious is responsible for the production of new organized forms from relatively disorganized elements.