Interestingness—A Neglected Variable in Discourse Processing

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Symptomatic of a contemporary concern with affective factors in cognitive processing, a corpus of research is now emerging on the role of interestingness in discourse processing. This research has concentrated on narrative prose and has adopted a structural approach, arguing for the centrality of event and discourse structure in producing an affect like interest. The authors point out that this approach considers only one type of interest—knowledge-triggered—to the exclusion of another important type—value-triggered. A more comprehensive understanding of interest will only be achieved by researching other genres, such as exposition, and by considering the multiple sources of interest-producing conditions. We suggest the notion of “informational significance” as an inclusive term, and underline the need for a process-based understanding of interest.

INTRODUCTION

A review of the literature on discourse processing indicates that the vast majority of studies in the area use propositional-structural models to explain comprehension, learning, and recall of discourse. These models describe discourse processing as the manipulation of mental representations consisting of propositions—concepts and the semantic relations connecting them—organized into structures of varying abstraction and generalization. The mental structures are assumed to be hierarchically organized, with the most important propositions being at the upper levels. The extent to which propositions can be recalled is determined by their structural positions; the
higher a proposition is in the structure, the greater its likelihood of being recalled. In processing discourse, readers/listeners are presumed to construct mental representations that correspond to the structural organizations of the texts and consequently the high-level propositions of text structures are expected to be recalled best.

A variety of structural organizations have been prescribed by different types of text analyses (e.g., Kintsch & van Dijk, 1978; Meyer, 1975; and Thorndyke, 1977) on the basis of which important propositions of a given text may be identified. Recall studies have supported the predictions of the structural analyses, as propositions identified to be important were indeed best recalled (e.g., Christiaansen, 1980; Kintsch & Keenan, 1973; Kintsch & van Dijk, 1978; Mandler & Johnson, 1977; and Meyer, 1975). Since, according to these findings, structural considerations seem to account for a considerable amount of what people remember, the objective structure of the text has been assumed to be the predominant factor of memory performance (Streitz, 1982).

While structural importance played a dominant part in the current theories of cognition, affective variables such as interest and liking have been ignored for several decades (Anderson, Shirey, Wilson, & Fielding, in press; Athey, 1976; Spiro, Crismore, & Turner, 1983; Zajonc, 1980; and others). Renninger and Wozniak (1983) noted that although individual differences in interest and their effect on memory have been common knowledge since at least the middle of the 19th Century, the concept of interest disappeared from the literature from the '30s on and only currently reemerged as a legitimate area of research. Iran-Nejad, Clore, and Vondruska (1981) suggest that the lack of attention paid by cognitive psychologists to affective factors and to their relations to cognition may be due to the fact that cognitive theory has been lax in integrating a pragmatic perspective into its purely structural approach.

Recently, investigators acknowledged that structural importance is not the only variable that determines how discourse is remembered and they started to examine the role of interestingness in text comprehension and recall (Luftig & Greeson, 1983; Luftig & Johnson, 1982). Most of this new research deals with stories, as it has been recognized that good stories must have interesting complications (de Beaugrand, 1982; van Dijk & Kintsch, 1983; Wiensky, 1980, 1982) and a function to entertain (Brewer & Lichtenstein, 1981, 1982; Brewer, 1983; Kintsch, 1980; Jose, 1984). Interesting text segments in other genres, such as expositions, have been investigated to a much lesser degree although interestingness must also be relevant to "non-story classes of discourse" (Stein, 1983). In the following sections we will first review the literature dealing with the role of interestingness in stories and then in expositions. Finally, we will suggest ways in which research should proceed to include the role of affective factors in discourse processing.
The Role of Interestingness in the Literature on Story Processing

Brewer and Lichtenstein (1981, 1982) and Brewer (1983) argued that stories are a subclass of narratives which are primarily designed to entertain. They achieve this function by producing affective states in readers, such as suspense, surprise, and curiosity. The affective states are created by particular presentations of events in the text structure which may or may not correspond to the order of the actual events they describe. For example, in a mystery story curiosity is created by omitting from the discourse certain initial events.¹

Brewer and his colleagues reported experimental evidence showing that the degree of suspense influences audiences' quality ratings of stories and the more informative and interesting the plot-line, the more likely it is considered to be a good story. Other researchers have also demonstrated the close link between story preference (evaluating a story as a "good" one) and the quality of affective response elicited by a story (e.g., Stein, 1983).

De Beaugrande (1982) pointed out that people's preference of hard, conflicting, challenging, suspenseful, and so on, stories entails a value judgment of quality that goes beyond story structure, and well-formedness appears to correlate with interest and entertainment. De Beaugrande further argued that stories used by many researchers have been "dismally lacking in surprise or interest" (p. 413). He considers interest to be one of the crucial variables affecting readers' reactions; an entertaining story will be acceptable without a message, while a dull one may lose its readers before any message can be delivered. Thus, interest is crucial for both "motivation" and "memorbility" and must be considered a real and valid component of story schema. De Beaugrande further suggested that since artificial stories authored by investigators frequently do not take into consideration human interest and involve an artificial organization and mode of processing, researchers should use naturally occurring stories to establish ecologically valid story grammars.

The studies mentioned above indicate that an affective response is an essential component in story processing, particularly concerning one's evaluative judgments. However, in order to learn more about how affect influences any type of discourse processing, we must look more specifically at how particular affective responses such as interest influence text comprehension and recall.

Schank (1979) may have been the first influential researcher to focus on the role of "interestingness" in discourse processing. Acknowledging that we always notice interesting information, he asked several related ques-

¹ By linking the origins of affective responses such as surprise, suspense, and curiosity to the sequential order in which readers come to know the events of a story (Witensky, 1983), interest produced in stories seems to be isolated from interest produced by other types of discourse which do not have event structures. We will deal with this problem in the final section of this paper.
tions: How do we pay attention to interesting ideas, where does this concept of interestingness come from, and where will we find it during processing? He illustrated with examples of how structurally identical stories can vary with the interest value of the words and concepts contained within them and concluded that unusual things that deviate from our expectations are more interesting than usual ones. More specifically, any information is interesting in direct proportion to its “abnormality” or “non-normative” quality. Schank further argued that expectation failures tend to guide our inferencing process by acting as indices retrieving relevant information from our general knowledge base. While the number of inferences one could potentially make while reading a story is rather large, interesting content helps to focus the inferencing process on a subset of cues contained in the story.

Schank also described how interest emerges from the schematic nature of story processing. The activation of a schema creates interest in the information which is missing but potentially relevant. For example, in reading about an assassination, Schank suggests that a reader’s interest in the identities of the victim and the assassin would be heightened. Such information also happens to be of high importance in the event structure underlying this event. According to Schank then, interestingness and event structure are intimately related.

Finally, Schank postulated that certain concepts like death, danger, power, sex, and so forth, are “absolute interests” and that certain characteristics like unexpectedness and personal relatedness are “relative operators” that operate on these concepts. For example, the death of an 82-year-old man from a heart attack would not be considered as interesting as the death of the same man from a blow on the head (unexpected death). If the man was an uncle (personal relatedness) rather than a stranger, this relationship would also contribute to the level of interest.

Schank (1979) has identified three conditions which elicit interest in a reader: when schema-congruent expectations are violated or deviated from, when schema-relevant information is missing, and when the content refers to salient themes (e.g., death) which transcend schemas (i.e., are salient no matter what the context). These conditions rely on event structure to a different degree. In the first two cases a piece of information is interesting because it violates expectations based on the event structure by either incongruence or anomaly. In the third case, a piece of information is interesting, not because of its relationship to an event structure, but rather because of its association with a cross-contextual theme. While Schank has identified three informational conditions which can generate interest, as well as the importance of background knowledge as a precondition, he has not adequately explained what necessarily constitutes the “interest” response itself. Such an explanation would account, for example, for the situation in which a reader, while encountering a story in which schema-relevant information
is missing shows no interest in searching for it. Definitions of interest should
describe something about processing itself, beyond the connection between
currently processed information and background knowledge.

Kintsch (1980) differentiated between interest produced by the rela-
tionships of incoming information to background knowledge, and that pro-
duced by the elicitation of a direct emotional response. He distinguished
cognitive interest, resulting from events which are interesting because of the
roles they play in some complex cognitive structure, or surprises they hold,
from emotional interest which is created through events which have arousal
function such as violence, sex, and so on.

Kintsch proposed that cognitive interest value is determined by the in-
teraction of three factors: how much one knows about the subject matter,
the degree of uncertainty the text generates in the reader and “postdictabil-
ity,” that is, how well the information can be meaningfully related to other
sections of the text. Among the three interacting factors, one—the reader’s
knowledge structure—plays a major role. The other two factors, uncertainty
(surprise) and postdictability, are dependent upon knowledge-based expec-
tations. Kintsch (1980) follows Berlyne’s classic argument to make his point;
“What creates interest is not novelty per se, but novelty in comparison with
a particular set of previous experiences” (p. 92). In addition, cognitive in-
terest is assumed to be a non-monotonic function of two of the factors:
knowledge and uncertainty, peaking at the right amount of knowledge and
uncertainty. That is, relatively small deviations from expectations are opti-
mal in creating interest. If a situation or event is as one would expect it to
be, interest must be lacking. On the other hand, if a situation or event is too
unfamiliar, the new information cannot be related to the existing knowledge
structures.

As Iran-Nejad (1984) points out, Kintsch’s explanation of interesting-
ness is more developed than Schank’s because it focuses on a feature of pro-
cessing as well as knowledge structure. Specifically, interest is the outcome
of a process whereby anomalous or surprising information is resolved within
the informational context of a story. In support of Kintsch’s position, Iran-
Nejad found that stories containing surprises elicited higher ratings of inter-
estingness than stories not containing surprises only if these stories also
contained a successful resolution. Raw surprise without resolution is no
more interesting than no surprise. As Iran-Nejad explains, the experience of
interestingness seems to be the consequence, rather than the cause, of the in-
tellectual activity involved in resolving some issue. Thus, missing or anoma-
alous or thematically salient information may elicit an affective response
such as surprise immediately, but does not create interest until the reader
has entered a process of resolving the incomplete understanding of a text.
Such an understanding of interest renders less paradoxical the situation in
which a reader encounters anomalous information but shows no interest in
it. Simply, something has interfered with the process of resolution, such as an alternative processing goal which makes other information in the text more relevant or salient.

Most of the above analyses concentrate on one source of interest: the class of events described as surprising, anomalous, novel, or unexpected. Little analysis is given to the other class of interesting events having to do with themes such as sex, death, and so on. These themes are described as “absolute interests” (Schank, 1979), generically important topics (Freebody & Anderson, 1981) or “human dramatic situations” (Wilensky, 1983). Wilensky describes the latter as general story themes which have an intrinsic interest to the reader. Kintsch describes this type of interest as “emotional interest,” speculating that some type of automatic arousal effect is involved. Such an experience of interest may seem to be very different from that type elicited by intellectual resolution. However, there is much controversy about whether arousal is a necessary component of emotional experience.* For example, with regards to discourse processing, Iran-Nejad (1984) demonstrated experimentally that interest and arousal level during reading are different responses. Using stories with intense emotional themes, he found that ratings of interestingness are not correlated to ratings of excitement (an indirect measure of arousal level).

We suggest that the two types of interest mentioned above (“cognitive” and “emotional”) may involve the same evaluative response. Both involve an increase in cognitive effort—information search, inferencing, and so on—to augment one’s knowledge and understanding of some circumstances or text. In other words, interest is an affect which is created when a person responds to a situation of special significance. The source of the special significance can vary a great deal, producing different types of interest. For example, the occurrence of dissonant information may lead to surprise, novelty, resulting in the type of interest that is usually associated with processing stories; in other cases interest that may be considered to be emotional is created by information relevant to important life themes (Anderson et al., in press). What is central to the response of interest is that a person is compelled to increase intellectual activity to cope with the greater significance of incoming information.

The question arises about the relationship between the two origins of interest: between something that resides in the stimulus and something that originates in the person, his/her orientation and goals (i.e., the common meaning of someone’s “interests”). We contend that interest occurs only in the interaction of stimulus and person so that one can never stipulate its origin in one to the exclusion of the other. However, the significance which produces interest may vary from universal to much variability based on individual differences. Similar to the findings of attribution theory, universal

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* See Berscheid (1984) for an illuminating review on the subject.
interests are more likely to be attributed to the stimulus, and variable interests to the person. Any story may contain information of universal significance to all readers mixed with information of personal significance to certain readers for a variety of personal reasons.

The idea that interest is elicited by informational significance may help us to understand the role of interestingness across genres and to gain a clearer understanding of the relationship between interest and discourse structure. Restricting ourselves to a single source of interest greatly limits the generalizations we can draw across genres. The interest associated with event structure expectations are relevant to narrative, but not to expository prose. We require an inclusive notion like informational significance to motivate us to consider other sources of interest and to draw them together into a comparative approach across genres. Also, the fact that there are different types of interest-triggering content alerts us to the possibility that there need not necessarily be a close match between interest and discourse structure. A good match depends on the rhetorical effectiveness with which any particular text incorporates interesting content into its discourse structure. One outstanding mechanism for producing such rhetorical effectiveness is the event structure contained at the core of every story, and this is perhaps why narratives have drawn most of the research on interestingness in discourse processing.

A number of researchers have noted the close correspondence between interesting and story structure. Walker and Kintsch (1981) demonstrated that interestingness information is perceived as important and macrorelevant in stories by asking subjects to give plausible continuations to relatively simple, short, and incomplete stories, that is, to complete their macrostructures. It was assumed that those text elements which were used in subject's completions were assigned macrorelevance. The results showed that subjects were significantly more likely to include the more surprising target items in their continuations than the less surprising ones, suggesting that subjects employ an interest strategy in forming macrostructures of stories (van Dijk & Kintsch, 1983). Similar findings were provided by Bower (1982) who reported that the more unusual or novel a particular narrative text segment, the more likely people were to consider it important, and by Hidi, Baird, and Hildyard (1987) who showed that in narratives adults tend to rate the same text segments as interesting and important.

We contend that the match between interest and importance in much of the literature is a result of the nature of the stories used. Stories have been composed in which the event structure is the major source of informational significance. This insures that importance and interestingness will closely overlap. However, informational significance and levels of importance in a story need not necessarily match. Knecht (as recently reported by Wilensky, 1983) hypothesized that the structural level effect shown by many
researchers in the past to be a good predictor of recall in stories might beecaused by intrinsically interesting story points that generally occur at high
structural levels. Wilensky (1983) explains Knecht's position as "the memo-
raible quality of points, together with the usual occurrence of points at a
high level, actually causes the level effect, as opposed to an intrinsic charac-
teristic of the level structure itself" (p. 590).

Knecht wrote one set of stories in which story points occurred at high
structural levels and another set in which identical points occurred at low
levels. Preliminary findings indicated that the recall of a point of a story is
substantially greater than the recall of the remainder of the story, regardless
of the level in the macrostructure. Knecht concluded that story point mem-
nbership is the most powerful determinant of story recall and it eliminates the
structural level effect.

Knecht's research demonstrates that patterns of informational impor-
tance and interestingness need not completely match in a story, although
chances are that they will overlap. This result underlines the importance of
considering the nature of the texts used in discourse processing research.
Texts may contain a single source of informational significance, or multiple
sources. While in most stories the event structure serves as a single source of
informational significance, many expositions present the reader with multiple
sources of informational significance. In such cases, these sources com-
pete for the reader's processing resources, so that the relationship between
important and interesting information has important consequences for the
processing (recall and learning) of the text.¹

The Role of Interestingness in the Literature on Expositions

While it is clear that the role of interestingness in the comprehension and
production of stories is being investigated, there has been only a minimal
concern in the literature with the kinds of propositions that are interesting
in expositions (Hidi, Baird, & Hildyard, 1983; van Dijk & Kintsch, 1983).
Before reviewing the relevant literature, however, we want to consider two
factors that may have discouraged researchers from examining the role of
interestingness in expositions.

¹ The fundamentally different relationship hypothesized between importance and inter-
estingness across genres may help to explain some unexpected findings of the literature. For
example, Cirilo and Foss (1980) reported that high-level propositions of stories take signifi-
cantly longer time to encode than low-level ones, while Britton, Meyer, Simpson, Hodredge,
and Curry (1979) and Britton, Meyer, Hodge, and Glynn (1980) reported no time differences in
the encoding of high- and low-level information in expositions. These results may be due to the
fact that the relation is not the same between important and interesting text segments in stories
and in expositions; that is, high-level propositions in stories tend to be also interesting while the
same is not the case of expositions. (Britton et al. (1980) interpreted these results in terms of
differential saliency of stories and expositions.)
First, to date we know very little about the types of text segments which readers or listeners find interesting in expositions. For example, concepts such as danger, power, death, and romance (Schank, 1979), tragedy, mystery, and enigma (Wilenisky, 1983), and suspense and surprise (Brewer & Lichtenstein, 1981, 1982) are usually viewed as involving some actions of a *protagonist* and, therefore, are suitable for central roles in story processing. The importance of such concepts for informative, expository prose is not clear, we do not know if these concepts are the ones that are relevant for processing expositions or if other types of information create interest and increased intellectual activity in this genre.

The second factor that may have contributed to the overwhelmingly structural direction of the research on expositions and to the lack of studies examining the role of interestingness in this area is the limited nature of texts that have been used in most of the related investigations. These tend to fall into two categories: either college level materials (Christaansen, 1980; Meyer, 1975; McCowan & Miller, 1983; and others) or artificial expository passages constructed for the explicit purposes of experimentation and frequently according to strict structural prescriptions (e.g., Dunn, Mathews II, & Bieger, 1982, Taylor, 1980, and Waters, 1983). These two types of texts are generally devoid of such dynamic components as excitement, surprise, or suspense and are, therefore, frequently dull. They tend to lack unusual, unexpected information and concepts with allegedly absolute interest values (Schank, 1979). Simply put, "interestingness" of such texts is unlikely to influence their comprehension and recall, and structural analyses may well predict processing and recall, suggesting that memory structures are isomorphic with the hierarchical structures of the passages. However, the world of expositions is not restricted to the two categories of college level informative texts and artificial expository passages. For example, a quick review of any textbook in social sciences at the elementary, middle, or high school level can provide the reader with expositions that have interesting segments. As Stein (1983) argued, many types of expositions create in the reader a heightened sense of interest in a particular topic. To recognize types of information that make certain segments of expositions interesting and how these types of text segments affect processing and recall seems to be crucial for both educational planning and curriculum design and therefore expository prose research must be extended to cover the role of interestingness in text processing (Anderson et al., in press).

While direct concerns with the relation of interest and structural importance in expositions have been minimal, some indirect research findings seem to support the hypotheses that in expositions interest and importance are not closely related and that both factors influence what is remembered. Taylor (1980) investigated children's and adults' abilities to recall expository texts and their sensitivities to text structure. The materials were two exposi-
history passages on animal protection, constructed for the purpose of the investigation. While sensitivity to text structure was reflected in the subjects' organization of delayed recall, neither children nor adults recalled superordinate concepts better than subordinate concepts. Unexpectedly, general concepts were not more memorable than details. Our examination of Taylor's text suggested that the subordinate information may simply have been more interesting than the topic sentences to these subjects. Alvoid (1983) reported that ninth graders recalled significantly more low-level ideas than high-level ideas from chapter-length American History text and suggested that these results may have been related to topic interest, as items of interest were often answered correctly regardless of the obscurity of the information. Winograd, Hare, Garner, Alexander, and Haynes (1984) and Winograd (1984) also found that high school juniors (especially the poor readers) reading expository passages were distracted by irrelevant information which was rated high in interest.

We have studied the question of whether interestingness may indeed be an important variable in the comprehension and recall of expositions. Hidi, Baird, and Hildyard (1982) examined children's free recall of three text types found in actual school textbooks: narratives, expositions, and mixed texts (expositions with interesting narrative intrusions). They found that mixed texts elicited significantly less recall of important information. When interesting content took a narrative form it effectively deflected recall away from the more important discursive information.

Hidi and Baird (1983, 1984) and Baird and Hidi (1984, 1985) carried out a series of studies investigating the free recall and summarization of a set of textbook expositions randomly selected from curriculum materials used in Ontario schools. Sentence importance and interestingness were rated by adults and students. The results showed that students' recalls contained some important information (on the average, 40% of total recall), some interesting information (also 40% of total recall), and some information rated as neither important nor interesting. The recall patterns did not evidence the selective recall of important information hypothesized by propositional-structural models of discourse processing. Subjects were just as likely to recall subordinate facts as superordinate facts, and as likely to recall interesting content as important information. Rather than being an abstractive process selectively retrieving one specific type of information (important), recall seems to be multidetermined and distributed. Recall salience was influenced by structural importance, interestingness, as well as the coherence connections between sentences.

Hidi and Baird also examined the source of the special significance in the most highly recalled sentences. They found that these sentences contained information exemplifying at least one of the four types of interest factors identified by Anderson et al. (in press) as contributing to sentence interest—
character identification, novelty, life theme, and activity level—or one of three types of concrete detail—quantification, a listing of objects or attributes, and visual imagery. Although some of these sentences were also structurally important, most were not; the most consensually recalled information did not primarily correspond to structurally important information, but rather to two attributes of content: interestingness and concreteness. These findings agree with those of Smith (1985). Using science and social science texts as we did, she found that children did not show evidence of differentiating between importance levels in their recall—that is, recalling superordinate but not subordinate ideas. Rather, what her subjects found most memorable were “those ideas or concepts which appeal to them or have some particular, almost personal meaning for them” (p. 2). We would extend her observation to include cultural and social (consensual) meanings the children share with their peers.

The above results demonstrate that interestingness plays an important role in the processing of expository prose. Recall is multidetermined; a number of factors compete in mediating recall. The propositional-structural approach assumes the primacy of one factor: conceptual importance as manifested through discourse structure. The research summarized above, however, suggests that content interestingness influences recall as much as importance, and in one aspect it may be superior; it may generate the most consensus in recall. This has important consequences for learning from text. Because it elicits the most consensus in recall, interestingness is a valuable tool in composing effective instructional prose. But it also competes with conceptual importance for limited processing resources. Therefore, it is essential for instructional theory to investigate more closely the relationship of interesting and important information in discourse processing. We have found that in some forms interesting content inhibits the recall of important information, as in the effect of narrative intrusions (Hidi et al., 1982). More research needs to be done to specify the manner in which an affective component like interestingness can increase intellectual activity and facilitate the recall and comprehension of important information.

The Affective Component of Discourse Processing

In this section we will review and explicate the themes contained above with the aim of making some programmatic suggestions about how research needs to proceed in studying the role of affect in discourse processing.

Much of the reviewed research on the role of affect in discourse processing concentrates on one major aspect of this phenomenon—the relationship of incoming information to discourse structure and to knowledge structure. The importance of event and discourse structure knowledge in mediating a variety of affective reactions to stories has been amply demonstrated in the
research described above. Affective responses to other discourse types (e.g., expositions, single sentence materials) are more difficult to interpret in structural terms, and attempts to explain their origins by other means have been negligible in the literature.

A structural approach interprets affective responses such as interest as affective states associated with particular conceptual relationships obtained between incoming information (events or facts) and prior knowledge structures. While we agree that these conceptual relationships have special informational significance and represent a major triggering condition for affective responses, we propose that there is another class of triggering conditions. This is the class of conditions in which affective responses are elicited through the association of a stimulus with internalized values, desires, preferences, or goals. The importance of this class of conditions to text processing is now beginning to be recognized. For example, while the original Kintsch and van Dijk (1978) model of text comprehension did not deal with the role of affect, in their recent work (van Dijk & Kintsch, 1983) the authors acknowledged that in discourse processing—in addition to knowledge activation—opinions, attitudes, values, and emotions are also activated. Furthermore, the interests, wishes, and goals of the "hearer" monitor the comprehension process through an active control structure. This active control structure is assumed to be part of long-term memory, details of which are yet to be specified. Another, but more extreme point of view is that of Zajonc (1980), who argues that there are two interacting but independent systems—the cognitive and the affective systems. Zajonc concentrates particularly on one type of affective control component—preferences—and how these may operate independently of cognitive processing.

The influence of other than knowledge-triggered interest has been neglected in past research on discourse processing perhaps because investigators have concentrated on the role of affect in story processing. While stories seem the natural type of discourse with which to study affective responses to discourse, the results from story processing research can be misleading. Conceptual importance and affective responses such as suspense or interest completely converge in most well-formed stories because both are dependent on the mediation of event structure. Events or facts become significant because of their roles in an event structure. Thus, it is relatively easy, when using stories as test materials, to restrict informational significance to knowledge-triggered conditions. Value-triggered conditions do not become relevant unless a situation is studied in which the informational content can have some personal or universal (cultural) meaning to the subject beyond the event structure of the discourse.

Studies are beginning to appear which look more closely at conditions in which interest is triggered independently of event structure. Kintsch and Bates (1977) found that extraneous sentences (e.g., jokes and announcements) were recognized better than structurally important topic sentences.
Anderson (1982) and Anderson et al. (in press) reported that interest had a powerful effect on children's learning and recall of single sentence materials. Loftus and Mackworth (1978) concluded that interest plays an important role in visual processing. Finally, Renninger and Wozniak (1983) demonstrated that young children's individual interests were strong and relatively well-focused; they also served as powerful determinants of perceptual and memory performances.

Expository prose offers a better opportunity to study the influence of value-triggered interest than narrative prose. There is a greater potential for a mismatch between interest-evoking and structurally important content in expository prose than stories for two main reasons. Firstly, the event structure which often ensures a close match between discourse structure and knowledge structure is absent. Secondly, there is a higher probability that a reader will be entertained by a story than be engaged with the topic of an exposition. Thus the crucial issue with processing expository prose becomes the question of how to engage readers' interest about a topic they may not already have an interest in, and in a way that they become receptive and attentive to the important informative content.

Thinking of interest as a general arousal experience is inadequate. This notion leads us to believe that all that is needed is to induce a general state of arousal which will automatically facilitate learning the material at hand. What is lost in this notion is the idea of interest as a process responding to the significance of information. As a process, interest has a durational aspect—there are triggering conditions and there are conditions which ensure the continuation of interest. Research has concentrated on the triggering conditions, such as novelty, thematic interest, and incongruity. Research now needs to concentrate on those conditions which maintain a reader's interest. We argue that this can be adequately researched only by studying the variety of ways in which information has significance to the reader, and this cannot be done without extending our understanding of the origins of interest beyond a reader's knowledge system to his/her value system mediated through affective experience.

REFERENCES


INTERESTINGNESS—A NEGLECTED VARIABLE


