

C2.1 – MTS

(Week 11 & 12)

SYNTHESIZING MEANING

TASK 1: COMPARING SUMMARIES



Text 1:

Read the text below thoroughly, making sure to retain its main ideas as you do. Then go on to Worksheet 1, below.

HAIR APPARENT

Beethoven's locks could reveal why he went deaf.

Ludwig van Beethoven probably thought he was taking his secrets to the grave when he died in 1827. He thought wrong. While the composer was decorously interred in his beloved Vienna, most of his hair wasn't: souvenir-hunting fans snipped off so much of his silver mane before burial that he went to his tomb almost bald.

What does a posthumous haircut have to do with secrets? Forensic scientists have long known that a body's hair has tales to tell. To begin with, it

carries DNA, which can be used to determine family relationships (that's how scientists determined that a woman named Anna Anderson was not, as she claimed, Princess Anastasia of Russia) or hereditary diseases (that's how they hope to prove Lincoln suffered from Marfan syndrome, a genetic disorder that makes its victims grow tall and gangly). Hair also soaks up drugs and other foreign substances from the body (low levels of arsenic in Napoleon's hair established that the ex-Emperor probably wasn't poisoned, as some historians believed).

Now it's Beethoven's turn, thanks to two Arizona music lovers. They bought a lock of hair at an auction in 1994, and have offered it for scientific

analysis. So far, researchers have learned that the composer didn't have lice and didn't take morphine for his kidney stones or his cirrhosis of the liver. They're still looking for traces of mercury and lead, either of which could have caused his famous deafness; the former would be an especially juicy find, since mercury in those days was used to treat syphilis,

which some scholars think Beethoven may have had. They'd also like to know if he took any medicine for the terrible diarrhea he reportedly suffered; his hair might reveal that too. It won't help anyone better appreciate the *Ninth Symphony*. But it might make for some high-brow gossip.

Worksheet 1:

Read the seven sample summaries of text 1 provided below, and decide which one/s you believe is/are the best. Remember that a good summary should 1) restate the main ideas of the original text; 2) exclude all unnecessary or superfluous details; 3) contain no information which contradicts the original; and 4) include no editorial remarks. Be prepared to discuss your findings with your classmates.

1. When Beethoven died in 1827, he didn't have most of his hair. He was interred almost bald because souvenir-hunting fans cut his hair off. Hair contains a lot of information about the body of its owner, since it carries DNA. It can be used to determine family relationships, hereditary diseases or the presence of drugs or other substances in the body. There have been many revelations thanks to experiments with hair. Now, scientists are experimenting with Beethoven's hair in order to find the cause of his deafness. However, even if they find the cause, it won't change Beethoven's music.
2. When he was interred, Beethoven was almost bald because his fans cut so much of his hair off. In 1994, two Arizona music lovers offered a lock of Beethoven's hair for scientific analysis. Researchers already know that the composer didn't have lice and didn't take morphine for his diseases. But they're still looking for the causes of Beethoven's deafness and they also want to determine if he took medicine for the diarrhea he apparently suffered.
3. Before Beethoven was interred, many souvenir-hunting fans snipped off much of his hair. A sample of that hair may now be used to reveal some of the composer's secrets. Hair carries DNA, which can be used to determine family relationships or hereditary diseases. It also soaks up drugs and other foreign substances from the body. Forensic scientists are now studying Beethoven's

hair, looking for traces of mercury or lead, chemicals which could have caused his famous deafness. Since mercury was used in those days to treat syphilis, the discovery of this chemical in Beethoven's remains could inspire a lot of gossip in the music world.

4. When Beethoven was buried, most of his hair had been removed by his fans. Scientific analysis has proved in several cases that hair can reveal important information about people, such as family relationships, hereditary diseases or the presence of foreign substances in the body. Now, owing to two of Beethoven's fans who recently donated a lock of his hair for scientific analysis, we may discover some secrets about the musician's life.
5. Beethoven died in 1827. When he was buried in Vienna, he didn't have most of his hair because his fans had snipped it off. Scientists know that a body's hair carries DNA, which can determine family relationships or hereditary diseases; hair can also soak up foreign substances from the body. Thanks to two Arizona music lovers who bought a lock of Beethoven's hair, researchers have learned that the composer didn't have lice and didn't take morphine for his diseases. They're still trying to find out if he used mercury to treat his syphilis and if he took any medicine for his diarrhea, illnesses he reportedly suffered.
6. In spite of Beethoven's wish to keep his secrets in his grave, thanks to the zeal of his fans we are now able to know what he was really like. A lock of the composer's hair, bought in an auction in 1994 by two Arizona music lovers, has been offered to scientists so they may analyze the genius's DNA. DNA determines family relationships or hereditary diseases. Beethoven's DNA shows that he suffered from kidney stones, cirrhosis and diarrhea, and also perhaps from syphilis. All this gossip is not very relevant in musical terms, but music fans may find it entertaining.
7. A lock of hair taken from Beethoven's head before his burial may reveal interesting secrets about this composer's life. Forensic scientists have long known that much can be learned from studying a body's hair. Hair not only contains DNA; which may be analyzed to determine family relationships and hereditary diseases, but it also absorbs drugs and other substances from the body. Researchers are now looking for traces of mercury or lead in Beethoven's hair. Either of these could have been the cause of his deafness, and the discovery of mercury would be especially interesting, as it was used in Beethoven's time to treat syphilis, a disease some scholars believe he may have had.

TASK 2: RESTATEMENT, DESCRIPTION, INTERPRETATION

Text 2:

Read the text below thoroughly, and then go on to worksheets 2 and 3, below.

1. Successive generations unconsciously absorb sexism in language because each speech community conveys to its children both a way to construct grammatical sentences and a value system for the use of its language. A young reader who sees in a school textbook *the courageous pioneer defended his land* forms a mental image of the pioneers that eliminates females — unless, of course, they are referred to later in the book specifically as women pioneers. The child learns about the history of our species — *man* or *mankind* — from the time of Peking *man* or Neanderthal *man*, even though a large number of the fossilized bones that have been unearthed once belonged to females.
2. The prevalence of sexism in the English language has been recognized in recent years, and so the question arises: What can be done about it? Some people have suggested abandoning the offensive forms *he*, *she*, *him*, *her*, *his*, and *hers* in favor of *it* and *its* to refer indiscriminately to both sexes. But a solution of this sort would imply a drastic revision of English grammar, which makes important distinctions between the human (*he*, *she*) and the non-human (*it*). Another suggestion has been to introduce into English a new third-person pronoun that refers to human beings only, regardless of sex; among those suggested have been *shis*, *tey* and *vis*.
3. But even if such changes were accepted by speakers of English, no evidence exists that they would necessarily improve the status of women. For example, the dialect spoken in the Ozark Mountains of Missouri has seemingly solved the grammatical problem of sexist pronouns by ignoring the rule that the pronoun must agree in number with its antecedent. It is perfectly acceptable in this dialect to produce such a nonsexist statement as *the child fell out of the tree and hurt themself* in place of the correct standard English *himself* or *herself*, depending on the gender of the child. Similarly, Turkish does not have much of the sexual chauvinism of English. It has a personal pronoun “o” that can mean either “he” or “she” and it uses a single word for both brothers and sisters, *kardes*, regardless of their sex. Yet the status of women both in the Ozark Mountains and in Turkey is certainly lower than that of women in most English-speaking communities that use sexist language; in Turkey, as in most predominantly Muslim nations, it is possible to find signs on the mosques with the following warning: “Women and dogs and other impure animals are not permitted to enter.” The fact is that language merely reflects social behavior and is not the cause of it. The problem of women’s status in English-speaking communities will not be solved by dismantling the language — but by changing the social structure.

FARB, Peter (1973): *Word Play. What Happens When People Talk.*
New York, Alfred A. Knopf.

 **Worksheet 2:**

1. Determine the text-type membership of text 1, above (expository, argumentative, instructive).

2. In as few words as possible, state what the subject-matter of the text is.

3. Provide a one-sentence summary of the main idea of each paragraph in the text.

Paragraph 1: _____

Paragraph 2: _____

Paragraph 3: _____

4. Now decide on a title for the text as a whole which reflects its central idea.

5. Complete the outline below, using your results up to this point to fill in the title space, as well as the spaces marked 1.2 and 3. For the spaces marked 1.1, 2.1 and 3.1, refer to the corresponding paragraphs to find supporting ideas.

Title: _____

1. _____

1.1 _____

2. _____

2.1 _____

3. _____

3.1 _____

6. Using the outline you have just composed, write a summary of text 1 (approximately 150 words).

 **Worksheet 3:**

1. Read and compare the two alternative summaries of the text provided below. Which of the two do you believe better reflects:
 - a) the surface structure of the original text?
 - b) the underlying relationship between concepts in the original text?
 - c) the circumstances surrounding the production of the text?

2. Now, compare the two summaries quoted here with the summary you wrote before. Assign one of the following three labels to each of the three summaries:
 - a) Restatement of the original
 - b) Description of the original
 - c) Interpretation of the original

Alternative summaries:

1. In a passage from his book *Word Play*, Peter Farb (1973) outlines the relationship between language use, social structure and discrimination against women. Beginning with the assertion that sexist language is unconsciously absorbed by successive generations of children through their constant exposure to its use in textbooks, the author goes on to give examples of a number of suggestions which have been made in recent years to do away with those aspects of English grammar which may be construed as sexist. Farb then provides examples of two linguistic communities whose use of language is marked by a relative absence of sexism, and whose female members are, nonetheless, the victims of a discrimination greater than that which may be observed in most standard English-speaking communities. Farb concludes by saying that what is needed to improve women's

status in English-speaking communities are changes in the social structure, not the language.

2. The essay argues that eliminating sexism in the English language will not do away with discrimination against women, and that what is really needed to improve women's status in English-speaking communities is a change in the social structure. The unconscious absorption of sexism in language by generations of speakers is portrayed as a catalyst for recent suggestions to effect "a drastic revision of English grammar". Nevertheless, it is said that no evidence exists to support the notion that such changes would improve women's status. On the contrary, examples are given to confirm the opposite belief, most notably the case of the Turkish-speaking community, whose grammar is less sexist than its English counterpart, yet whose members are characterized as notoriously discriminatory in their thinking, to the point that they have been known to equate women with "dogs and other impure animals."

THEORETICAL NOTIONS:

Key to an understanding of how summary-writing is a useful way of reflecting students' interpretation of text meaning is the theory of microstructure and macrostructure as outlined by Kintsch and van Dijk (1978). What these authors actually propose is a theory of how readers use the formal and conceptual structures (i.e. the cohesive and coherent organization) of texts to understand text meaning.

Kintsch and van Dijk distinguish between *microprocessing* and *macroprocessing* in reading comprehension. In overall terms, microprocessing involves the interpretation of texts at the level of words, phrases and sentences, while macroprocessing has to do with how readers come to a global understanding of text meaning. According to the authors, the reader begins his understanding of a text by organizing its "elements of meaning" into a coherent microstructure, a task which is achieved by converting concrete phrases and sentences in the text into propositions in the mind. The reader then subjects this organized series of propositions (the microstructure) to a set of cognitive operations or "macrorules" as follows:

1. **deletion** – eliminating information considered to be unimportant or unnecessary, that is, omitting accidental details
2. **selection** – choosing that information which the reader considers most relevant, at the same time that general knowledge assumed to be familiar to all is deleted
3. **generalization** – abstracting the characteristics common to a series of propositions
4. **construction** – blending similar concepts together

The conscious application of these macrorules aids students in the analysis and interpretation of textual meaning and of course assists them in reflecting their interpretation in summary form.