

Alan Bailin and Ann Grafstein, *Readability: Text and Context*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. 79.99\$, hardback.

Reviewed by Mario Bisiada (Universitat Pompeu Fabra, Barcelona, Spain)

According to the authors, the book "examine[s] a wide range of evidence pointing to factors that have an effect on readability" (p. ix). It is aimed to serve as a "guidance to writers and educators" (p. ix) and as a "one-stop resource for both scholars and practitioners" (p. 1). It also aims to be an "attempt to begin to establish a direction for a unified study of readability" (p. ix). I will argue in this review that it does provide an overview of existing readability studies, but that its criticism somewhat narrowly focusses on readability formulas while ignoring existing non-formulaic proposals and lacking the theoretical depth and cross-linguistic rigour to really provide an interdisciplinary approach to the notion of readability.

In writing this book, which is based on their 2001 article, Bailin and Grafstein have "hoped and assumed that the reader of this book will come from a diverse range of disciplines" (p. 4) and that the book "will be accessible to anyone with a professional interest in the principles of effective written communication" (p. 4). The authors further say that they have "tried to ensure throughout that the arguments we make will be clear even for those who cannot or do not wish to follow the more technical details" (p. 4).

The book is divided into six chapters. In the first, introductory chapter, the basic concepts of the monograph are outlined. Bailin and Grafstein suggest three basic concepts related to textual comprehension: linking of information units, ambiguity and background knowledge (p. 5). The chapter argues that claims about readability can be supported by whatever type of evidence is available, but that empirical approaches should always be supported by a sound theoretical approach.

The second chapter "Readability Formulas" provides a historical account and criticism of readability formulas. Bailin and Grafstein argue that there is a focus change in Western rhetoric from argumentation to communication, and trace the study of readability to classical rhetoric.

Chapter 3, "Grammar and Readability", analyses the effect of grammatical complexity, ambiguity and linking of information, which are central notions in the book's approach to readability. Chapter 4, entitled "Meaning in Words and Sentences", then focusses on semantic aspects of readability, especially issues of background knowledge in understanding a text and semantic ambiguity.

Chapter 5 focusses on "Coherence and Discourse" properties of texts and their effect on readability, where, in addition to a further discussion of conceptual linking and background knowledge, the effect of frames and metaphors on readability are discussed.

The final chapter, entitled "Towards a Theory of Readability", summarises the arguments made in the book and outlines the aspects that Bailin and Grafstein consider to have an impact on readability.

The study of readability is here defined as "an inquiry into what properties of texts help or hinder communication". Bailin and Grafstein do not separately introduce the term "comprehensibility" and seem to make no such distinction; elsewhere, they use the term interchangeably with readability ("[we] examine the properties of texts and their contexts in order to identify factors that affect comprehensibility and ease of reading", p. 63). As the term "comprehensibility" is often used (see, e.g. Charrow 1988; Maksymski et al. 2015), it would have been useful for the authors to at least state that they do not differentiate between readability and comprehensibility.

The title of Chapter 1 announces a "new approach to readability". However, while the authors make a good case for the value of the synthesis conducted in their book, it is not entirely clear what is "new" about their approach. One suspects it may be the understanding of readability through the concepts of linking, ambiguity and background knowledge, but the book does not make this clear. At least in the introductory chapter, a little more orientation towards the academic discipline would have benefitted the aim of establishing a unified theory of readability considerably.

Bailin and Grafstein make the argument that what are usually called complex sentences may be "easier to understand than simpler sentences because they make the relationships between clauses explicit" (p. 55), which is a welcome view given the usual stance to avoid long and complex sentences in most style guides and writing manuals (see also the discussion in Bisiada (2014: 19-20)). It is commendable that real-life examples from a wide variety of text types and registers are used to support artificially designed sentences to illustrate and analyse a particular issue. A further positive aspect about this book are the summaries that are presented at the end of each chapter and that repeat the main points and arguments of each chapter in a concise form.

The book presents some interesting evidence that revising texts according to readability formulas may not make them easier to understand. Chapter 4 also has some well-argued criticisms of issues connecting readability to the lexicon, such as word lists and assumptions about vocabulary size of individual readers, where Bailin and Grafstein argue that "the use of word lists assumes a level of homogeneity among the speakers of a language that does not exist" (p. 128). However, in general, the criticism of readability formulas in this book is not particularly original. For instance, Bruce et al (1981) already criticised the neglection of cognitive aspects by readability formulas and pointed out that formulas "cannot correctly predict how a particular reader will interact with a particular book" (1981: 1).

A major shortcoming of the present book, however, is the lack of engagement with already existing, more refined models of readability. The authors criticise at length and in some detail classic accounts and ad-hoc approaches to readability from the 1920s (15-25) whose claim to scientific validity is at least outdated. It is questionable whether these approaches still receive academic attention and really need to be attacked in this detail. That is especially questionable as more complex and sophisticated theories that already go beyond a formulaic approach are ignored.

It is especially striking that Bailin and Grafstein state that their "unified account of the factors in text and context that contribute to readability" is a mere beginning and invitation to further research (p. 64), when such research has been conducted for several decades. At no point do the authors mention, for instance, the Hamburg model of comprehensibility ("Hamburger Verständlichkeitsmodell", Langer et al. 1974), the extension of that model proposed by Groeben and Christmann (1996) or the Karlsruhe Comprehensibility Concept (Göpferich 2001, 2009), all of which go beyond readability formulas and are based on judging dimensions of comprehensibility such as semantic redundancy, stylistic simplicity and personalisation.

Do Bailin and Grafstein not mention those models because they appear under the term "comprehensibility" rather than "readability", or just because they originate in Europe rather than America? The book generally seems to focus on English, though there is no mention of such a focus: the authors merely talk about "texts", "writers" and "well-known readability formulas" (p. 7). Those readability formulas only include formulas devised for English, and the book does not, for instance, mention the Wiener Sachtextformeln (Bamberger and Vanecek 1984) or LIX (Björnsson 1968), though those formulas could have been subjected to the same criticism the authors have for other readability formulas. A more international, cross-linguistic perspective would have done well to support the inclusive aim of the book.

In some cases, there exist notions and research that would have been relevant to the authors' discussion but that they do not invoke. The discussion of syntactic complexity in chapter 3 strangely ignores Dahl's (2004) major work in this area, which already established much of what is argued for at length here. The section on metaphor in Chapter 5 does not mention grammatical metaphor. It would have been interesting to read a discussion of the effect of grammatical metaphor on readability, which has attracted some research recently (see, for instance, Lassen 2003).

One central factor that Bailin and Grafstein repeatedly point out as impeding readability is "the difficulty of linking syntactic material [...] due to intervening material" (p. 75-79, also pp. 93, 192). The discussion of examples from English

and French here is certainly valid and accurate, but the authors do not problematise the fact that in some languages, the presence of "intervening material" represents the normal information structure, for example in German, which has the verbal bracket ("Satzklammer"). In that language, intervening material of the kind discussed here (p. 79) between the subject and the main verb is common to every subordinate clause, and there is no evidence that this may be a readability or comprehensibility problem for speakers (Thurmair 1991; Marschall 1994; Wegener 2007; Bisiada 2013: 49). Indeed, when Hans-Dietrich Genscher famously told the citizens of the GDR that "Wir sind zu Ihnen gekommen, um Ihnen mitzuteilen, dass heute Ihre Ausreise..." ['We have come to you to tell you that your departure...'], people did not need to wait for the main verb at the end of that subordinate clause to understand the message and drown out the rest of the sentence.

Bailin and Grafstein are right in that the examples they provide are "intuitively difficult to read", but perhaps this is a language-dependent rather than a psycholinguistic issue. I would argue that intervening material is a matter of convention and that speakers develop ways of overcoming the time they have to wait for the main verb by anticipating what is likely to be said. In general, cross-linguistic perspectives are regrettably absent from the book. The authors only seem to draw on other languages when this supports their argument, but not to problematise any issues. That makes the book of little use to scholars working with languages other than English and somewhat restricts the wide circle of readers intended for this book.

Chapter 6 announces by its title a step towards a theory of readability, but I have trouble seeing what this book actually brings forth. There are some summarising statements such as "readability theory needs to examine the kinds of gaps that exist between the non-textual information that a text requires and the non-textual information that a reader brings to the text" (p. 180). Based on their definition of readability, which concerns aspects of written texts that enhance or impede comprehension of fluency, they frame readability theory within text theory rather than developmental psychology (p. 201).

Other than those points, the chapter consists to a large extent of a summary of the book, and Bailin and Grafstein mainly repeat the criticism of readability formulas that is already found earlier in the book. Given that there have long been proposals going beyond the use of formulas (see above), the conclusion to the book seems oddly out of date with current research on the issue. Much of the rest of the chapter is a collection of questions, with the aim of inviting further research in this area. Some of them, for instance the issue of genre conventions, are currently being addressed. This final section of the chapter would have benefitted from some pointers to such existing research.

The authors also tentatively propose a "readability checker" (p. 191) for word processing software that would function similarly to a spellchecker. It is somewhat startling that they, having argued extensively against the use of word lists in Chapter 4 ("no single list of words can be used to measure difficulty", p. 128), end up suggesting to "develop lists of words which would likely be familiar to most readers within a particular population" (p. 191), which are then applied to a particular person or group according to their demographic characteristics. Exactly how the use of several lists is superior to the use of one list, and from what point or size onwards a group of readers can be assumed to be sufficiently homogeneous to warrant the use of a word list is unfortunately not explicated.

In terms of formal appearance, the book is well edited in terms of spelling, but words are missing in various places in every chapter, which suggests that proofreading has not been done very carefully or that the book has simply been spellchecked rather than proofread.

In all, then, the book leaves the reader somewhat wanting given the promises of a new approach to readability and the development of a theory of readability. With a bit more effort cross-disciplinarily, especially as regards the treatment of studies published under the header of comprehensibility, and cross-linguistically, the book could have been a significantly more valuable resource on readability than it is in its present form.

References

Bailin, Alan and Ann Grafstein. "The linguistic assumptions underlying readability formulae: A critique." *Language & Communication* 21.3 (2001): 285-301.

Bamberger, Richard and Erich Vanecek. *Lesen--Verstehen--Lernen--Schreiben*. Wien: Jugend und Volk, 1984.

Bisiada, Mario. "From hypotaxis to parataxis: An investigation of English-German syntactic convergence in translation". Diss University of Manchester, 2013.

Bisiada, Mario. "'Lösen Sie Schachtelsätze möglichst auf': The impact of editorial guidelines on sentence splitting in German business article translations." *Applied Linguistics* (2014). Advance online access.
doi:10.1093/applin/amu035.

Björnsson, Carl-Hugo. *Läsbarhet*. Stockholm: Liber, 1968.

Bruce, Bertram C., Andee D. Rubin and Kathleen S. Starr. *Why readability formulas fail*. Urbana: University of Illinois, 1981.

Charrow, Veda. "Readability vs. comprehensibility: A case study in improving a real document." *Linguistic complexity and text comprehension: Readability*

issues reconsidered. Ed. Alice Davison and Georgia M. Green (eds.) Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1988.

Dahl, Östen. *The growth of maintenance and linguistic complexity*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2004.

Göpferich, Susanne. "Von Hamburg nach Karlsruhe: ein kommunikationsorientierter Bezugsrahmen zur Bewertung der Verständlichkeit von Texten." *Fachsprache* 23.3-4 (2001): 117-138.

Göpferich, Susanne. "Comprehensibility assessment using the Karlsruhe Comprehensibility Concept." *The Journal of Specialised Translation* 11 (2009): 31-51.

Groeben, Norbert and Ursula Christmann. "Textverstehen und Textverständlichkeit aus sprach-/denkpsychologischer Sicht." *Texte im Fremdspracherwerb*. Ed. Wolfgang Börner and Klaus Vogel. Tübingen: Narr, 1996. 67-89.

Langer, Inghard, Friedemann Schulz von Thun and Reinhard Tausch. *Verständlichkeit in Schule, Verwaltung, Politik und Wissenschaft: Mit einem Selbsttrainingsprogramm zur Verständlichen Gestaltung von Lehr- und Informationstexten*. München: Reinhardt, 1974.

Lassen, Inger. *Accessibility and acceptability in technical manuals: A survey of style and grammatical metaphor*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2003.

Maksymski, Karin, Silke Gutermuth and Silvia Hansen-Schirra. *Translation and comprehensibility*. Berlin: Frank & Timme, 2015.

Marschall, Matthias. "Satzklammer und Textverstehen im Rahmen der kausativen Struktur: Zur Funktion der Verbendstellung im Deutschen." *Deutsche Sprache* 22 (1994): 310-330.

Schrivener, Karen A. "Evaluating text quality: The continuum from text-focused to reader-focused methods." *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication* 32.4 (1989): 238-255.

Thurmair, Maria. "Warten auf das Verb: Die Gedächtnisrelevanz der Verbklammer im Deutschen." *Jahrbuch Deutsch als Fremdsprache* 17 (1991): 174-202.

Wegener, Heide. "Entwicklungen im heutigen Deutsch: Wird Deutsch einfacher?" *Deutsche Sprache* 35 (2007): 35-62.