

Strategies Based On Semantics and Pragmatics: Dealing With Text Completion Questions and Sentence Equivalence Questions in GRE

Dr. Pothapragada Sasi Ratnaker¹, Dr. Vijaya Babu Palukuri², A. Suresh Babu³

^{1,3}Assistant Professor, Division of Humanities, Department of Science and Humanities, Vignan's Foundation for Science, Technology and Research, Deemed to be University, Vadlamudi, Guntur, Andhra Pradesh.

²Associate Professor, Division of Humanities, Department of Science and Humanities, Vignan's Foundation for Science, Technology and Research, Deemed to be University, Vadlamudi, Guntur, Andhra Pradesh.

Article Info

Volume 82

Page Number: 4336 - 4343

Publication Issue:

January-February 2020

Abstract

Pervasively, testing in English proficiency is mandated for entry level jobs. Internationally acclaimed tests like GRE and SAT have Text Completion and Sentence Equivalence Questions to test the aspirants' response on a given text. A verbal trainer combines logical analyses and vocabulary teaching. Semantics and pragmatics become pertinent to a prospective verbal trainer as certain concepts in semantics and pragmatics cause a bilateral stretch for instruction in logic and language.

Article History

Article Received: 18 May 2019

Revised: 14 July 2019

Accepted: 22 December 2019

Publication: 21 January 2020

Keywords: GRE, Text Completion Question, Sentence Equivalence Question.

I. INTRODUCTION

"...Now spoken sounds ['words'] are symbols of affections of the soul [thoughts], and written marks are symbols of spoken sounds. And just as written marks are not the same for all the men ['are language specific'], neither are spoken sounds. But what these are in the first place signs of –affections of the soul – are the same for all ['are universal']; and what these affections are likenesses of – actual things – are also the same for all men..."

- Aristotle in De interpretatione

'Sentence completion questions' or 'Text completion questions' in GRE, or 'Fill in the blank questions' are persistent tests of verbal ability. Classroom instruction combines textual analysis and vocabulary to maneuver the aspirants to mark the accurate answers. Occasionally, when the contextual felicity of the correct option, trainers' conversancy

with linguistics will be value additive in verbal sessions. The words of Aristotle do find their way in a verbal session.

Text Completion Question in GRE verbal section comprises single, double and triple blank questions with five options (one to be opted from the set of five options), six options (two to be opted from the two sets of three options) and nine options respectively (three to be opted from three sets of three options) corresponding to each blank. Another component of GRE verbal section is Sentence Equivalence Question with a blank in a single sentence and corresponding six options. The choice of two options should keep meaning of the sentence unaltered when either of them are individually employed.

Text Completion Questions and Sentence Equivalence Questions can be classified syntactically. First, 'Cause and Effect' type

question, in two splices, relate as cause and effect and the appreciation of their relevance finds the correct answer. Second, questions with ‘restatement’ where the restated part answers the question. Third, in ‘reason – assertion’ mode, a close variant of first type, one segment asserts the other segment or vice versa –. However, all the above are indebted to the techniques in ‘Hint to blank’ type of questions which is occasionally devoid of features of the former. The paper utilizes linguistics for accurate identification of the correct option entailing a more logical elimination of the wrong options. Sample questions are abstracted from the second edition of GRE Official Guide.

Application: 1

Peirce (1958) defined sign as ‘something of knowing by which one knows something more’ (8.322) that helps in marking the correct option the same, at times, obliterates incorrect ones as in examples 01 and 02:

Text Completion Question 01

In parts of the Arctic, the land grades into the landfast ice so _____ that you can walk off the (1)

coast and not know you are over the hidden sea.

(2)

- | | |
|-----------------|------------------|
| A. permanently | B. imperceptibly |
| C. irregularly | D. precariously |
| E. relentlessly | |

Application: 2

This sign could be a word, a phrase, clause, punctuation and at times even a hint of irony and sarcasm. If the ‘sign’ is perceived as ‘hint’, the sign or hint of ignorance in the second segment confirms option B as the answer.

Text Completion Question 02

Given the evidence of Egyptian and Babylonian _____ later Greek civilization, it

(1)

would be incorrect to view the work of Greek scientists as an entirely independent creation.

(2)

- | | | | | |
|----------------|-----------------|----------------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| A. disdain for | B. imitation of | C. ambivalence about | D. deference to | E. influence on |
|----------------|-----------------|----------------------|-----------------|-----------------|

‘Independent work’ of Greek scientists as ‘a myth’ denotes that Greek scientists are ‘influenced’ by Egyptians and Babylonians. The signs ‘incorrect’ and independent creation ‘suggest that the option ‘influence on’.

Application: 3

Text Completion Question 03

Kagan maintains that an infant’s reactions to its first stressful experiences are part of a natural process of development, not harbingers of childhood unhappiness or _____ signs of adolescent anxiety.

- | | |
|---------------|------------|
| A. prophetic | B. normal |
| C. monotonous | D. virtual |
| E. typical | |

Applying the rule of anomaly¹, the expression, ‘adolescent anxiety’, with negative sense cannot be ‘normal’, ‘virtual’, ‘typical’ and finally no anxiety is ‘monotonous’ as in options A, D, E and C. The accuracy of option ‘prophetic’ is asserted in its semantic and lexical parallelism² with ‘harbingers’ and ‘childhood unhappiness’.

Application: 4

Generic approaches to solve Text Completion and Sentence Equivalence Questions inform the trainers assigned with learners from non-literature or non-linguistics backdrop. The learners are to be apprised to consider the given sentence as atomistic and self-supportive unit bearing some perspective, incident or conditional status with due alert on incorrect and

indiscreet assumptions that are extraneous to the sentence. Trainees' confidence heightens with the assertion that the given sentence with the 'word' existed before its status as a Text Completion or Sentence Equivalence Question with a blank. The logic of choosing the correct option follows the syntactic and semantic cues which mutually complement. The same underlie the logic to eliminate incorrect options for being anomalous with the syntactic and semantic cues. The application of linguistics concepts to solve the following example vivifies the discussion.

Text Completion Question 04

Vain and prone to violence, Caravaggio could not handle success: the more his (i)_____ as an artist increased, the more (ii)_____ his life became.

Blank (i) Blank (ii)

- | | |
|---------------|------------------|
| A. temperance | D. tumultuous |
| B. notoriety | E. providential |
| C. eminence | F. dispassionate |

Caravaggio as the 'self' the sentence provokes some observations: "Caravaggio could not handle success" has an implicature³ about Caravaggio being successful. However, he was vain and prone to violence. Prone to means likely or liable to suffer from, do, or experience something unpleasant or regrettable. Some ambiguity prevails as whether Caravaggio's vanity and violence existed well before his success or featured him on being successful? The sentence presents a common ground⁴: success, when someone is prone to violence and vanity as a struggler is inconceivable. The two flaws that reason his inability to handle success are untold as his chronic feature. The restatement after colon (:) asserts that he being unable to handle success is expressed in terms of his life, one's vanity, violence causing him to 'lose' his glory to tumult. Quantity polarity⁵ with three negative expressions like 'vain', 'violence' and 'could not' as against 'success' suggest eventual dire

straits. Of all the options for the second blank, except 'tumultuous', none can rationalize the inevitable tribulation in Caravaggio's life.

The sentence bears conflict: Caravaggio could not handle success denotes a durative⁶ state or temporal condition to implying that as an artist, he maneuvers himself ahead with vanity and violence that thwarted his success. Conflict as indicated by colon which leads or points from one clause to another; from statement to explanation (Mc Arthur & Mc Arthur, 2005:232). And as already a negative expression fills the second blank, the first blank should have a positive expression unlike 'notoriety'.

With 'could' denoting ability, the initial part of the sentence suggests that vanity and violence in Caravaggio overwhelmed his ability to be successful. The expression handle presents a perspective by Oxford Dictionary as Manage a situation or problem. "The word can be analyzed with its application in the sentences A to D. (A) Both local and international human rights groups have criticized the handling of his trials as unfair, with Amnesty International labeling Anwar a political prisoner (B) You will find that, on most ships, the staff is well accustomed to handling crowds and is skilled at moving passengers with dispatch and courtesy (C) Some critics of the president's handling of Iraq are expressing deep concern the mission there is turning into a situation similar to what happened during the Vietnam War and in the example clause – (D) a lawyer's ability to handle a case properly."

Under the same head of Manage, a meaning to handle is Cope or deal with someone or something clarified as – "(A) You have to deal with it, handle it, cope with it. (B) I don't think I could handle it if they turned me down. (C) My mother is not the sort of person who handles interpersonal interactions well, she finds them stressful and tends to burn her bridges too easily when she gets fed up with people (D) Through a divorce and the death of my father I wasn't able to handle things like I did before." A

different shade of meaning to the phrase is evident considering the syntactical relation that the expression 'handling' shares with adverbs (properly); adjectives (unfair and well) and compound expressions (turned down, deep concern and like I did before) which are respectively associated with instances like a case, a trial, interpersonal interactions, stressful conditions, and a condition emotionally different from the present. The expressions properly, unfair and well imply a condition that a case, interpersonal interactions and a trial suggest a likeliness of other outcomes with a different sort of treatment than they are given in the example sentences. Matters like the case, trial and interpersonal relations demand one's skill, rationality and patience and the underlying aspect is handling them skillfully, rationally and patiently is a problem to many. This makes the case for two kinds of skills: one skill to achieve success and the second skill or ability to retain it. Compounding the denotation of vain and violence as well as success as two problems, the sentence clarifies that one problem leads to another. The use of correlative comparison⁷ (...the more...) suggests that the expression in second blank is contingent with the one in the first blank.

The semantic meaning of 'artist' plays an essential role to identify the word in the first blank. The expression 'artist' refers to one's aesthetic effort. However, mere aesthetics without public recognition do not suffice to be rated as an artist. The expression 'his _____ as an artist...' suggests that Caravaggio's recognition is durative. Aesthetics and recognition enrich the word and become anomaly with 'notorious' and 'temperance'. Thus, the only word left is 'eminence'. On the other side, the word 'life' lacks animacy⁸ to associate with 'dispassionate'. Likewise, since 'life' is durative it rejects the option 'providential' for the latter refers to something more instantaneous. The word left after elimination is 'tumultuous'. As already mentioned, the use of correlative comparison (the more) demonstrates that Caravaggio's life became miserable with success.

Application: 5

Text Completion Question 05

It was her view that the country's problems had been _____ by foreign technocrats, so that to ask for such assistance again would be counterproductive.

Considering the SEQ's utterance meaning⁹, the source (here a woman) expresses a woman's opinion on foreign technocrats' involvement. A comma splice follows a consequential conjunction (so that). If the chunk before 'so that' is considered A, the latter portion B explains the possible consequence due to the condition in A. If the context¹⁰ of the utterance is considered, the probable preceding utterances must be between or among persons who were discussing their country's future. The discussion probably covered these aspects:

- (i) Role of foreign technocrats in their country and impact.
- (ii) Condition that arose to seek or reject assistance from foreigners.
- (iii) Experience what they had earlier when the foreigners assisted them.
- (iv) Woman's evident antagonism against involvement of foreigners.
- (v) A debate on foreign assistance as being beneficent or maleficent.
- (vi) Comments on the subjectivity or objectivity of the woman's stance against foreigners.

Context (i) clarifies the foreign technocrats' role when the country was in problems. Consequential conjunction anaphorically¹¹ portend a 'counterproductive' situation discouraging the role of foreign technocrats. From the options, 'diagnosed' can be ruled out because, no new problems are mentioned and one initial diagnosis removes the need for further diagnoses. The 'second' diagnose to be proposed requires the status of 'first' diagnose. As no adverb like 'wrongly' 'improperly' and 'hastily' employed before

‘diagnosed’ the same activity must have been proven useful for which the second request for the same cannot be counterproductive.

‘Ameliorated’ is incorrect as problems cannot be ameliorated. Ignoring this, if ‘amelioration’ relieves from suffering or bad condition, and if foreign technocrats provide amelioration, the sentence sounds absurd as such second ‘amelioration’ would be hardly counterproductive. Moreover, the need to repeat amelioration is not supported by the sentence.

‘Ascertained’ is incorrect for the semantic anomaly it creates with ‘problems’. Problems can be identified or noticed and the nature of the problem can be confirmed. ‘Ascertained’ implies to accord certainty to something for the sake of eliminating vagueness or uncertainty. The expression ‘country’s problems’ where a possessive case is employed relating ‘problems’ to ‘country’ implies that the problems are already defined.

The context also could be merely

- (i) a record of varied opinions upon inviting foreign support to solve the country’s problems.
- (ii) an opinion seeking exercise on the reasons why foreign support should not be sought.

Since the sentence mentions ‘country’s problems’, it implies that problems were present in the country well before the involvement of foreign technocrats. And the expression ‘ask for such assistance again’ implies that the assistance of foreign technocrats was sought earlier and “such” in ‘ask for such assistance’ creates ambiguity¹² as whether ‘such assistance’ would mean (i) ‘assistance of same kind or nature’ i.e. of the same magnitude or quality (ii) ‘assistance from the same individuals who are foreign technocrats – the same who are sought assistance earlier (iii) assistance from foreign technocrats who did not previously assist the country to solve its problems (iv) foreign technocrats from one particular country (vi) technocrats from any foreign country. Common essence can be drawn from this ambiguity is the

woman’s opinion that is highly antagonistic to foreigners. The expression ‘foreign’ is crucial to signify the possible ‘gap’ between the country’s problems and their appreciation by foreign technocrats and without such appreciation, foreign technocrats’ assistance will invariably lead to aggravation - ‘exacerbation’. The initial problematic (bad) condition pushes the problematic situation to its next level and hence, the option ‘worsen’ is the second right option.

Application: 6

Sentence Equivalence Question 02

Although it does contain some pioneering ideas, one would hardly characterize the work as _____.

- A. orthodox B. eccentric
- C. original D. trifling
- E. conventional F. innovative

Logical polarity¹³ informs that ‘two negatives make a positive’. For instance, It’s true that it’s true equals to It’s true, but It’s false that it’s false changes polarity and equals to It’s true. The sentence with two discourse markers¹⁴ ‘although’ and “,” (comma) are employed as a boundary in the discourse by suggesting a shift or partial shift in topic (Muller, 2005 9). Mani (2000) opines that [.] although” patterned text segment related by the discourse marker starts at the beginning position of the instantiated pattern, and ends at the end of the sentence or at a position determined by the procedure associated with the next discourse marker pattern in the sentence” (115). A vantage point or point of view¹⁵ marks one’s opinion on the discourse topic - quality of the work - as containing ‘pioneering’ ideas - the first to use or apply a new method, area of knowledge, or activity. But, the vantage point or point of view hints at another vantage point of view in ‘one’ and shifts the mood with ‘hardly’ to degrade the previous truth content to an insignificant degree. Impersonal pronoun ‘one’ refers to people who are ambivalent to consider the

book with pioneering ideas. The negativity suggests complementarity¹⁶ where the act of writing falls into two exclusive domains of being original/ innovative or imitative/ copied. The discourse marker ‘although’ negates ‘pioneering ideas’ and suggests the opposite words – original and innovative as the answers. The word ‘orthodox’ both in its meaning and collocation is distant from ‘work’ and enables a strategy to eliminate ‘conventional’ which corresponds to ‘orthodox’ in sense. ‘Trifling’ and ‘eccentric’ do not satisfy the need for positive term in the blank.

The concepts of semantics and pragmatics can be practically applied to teach Text Completion Questions and Sentence Equivalence Questions in GRE and other exams as sound basis to communicate the dynamics of verbal logic to the students. Classroom discussion by appreciating the semantic and pragmatic aspects of language in the sentence and relating the ideas of the same for increasing accuracy enhances the students’ participation in a livelier classroom.

Glossary:

1. Anomaly (semantic): “Semantic anomaly occurs when interacting meanings in a grammatically well-formed expression intuitively do not ‘go together’ normally, as in plastic anxiety or feeble hypotenuses. Expressions like these are not necessarily uninterpretable; indeed, anomaly in a literal interpretation of an expression is often a sign that it is intended to be taken non-literally” (Cruse 13).

2. Semantic and lexical parallelism: Lexical or semantic parallelism leads to a partial but not particularly successful attempt to explain the specific pairing of words by different linguistics rules such as marking or minimal contrast.

3. Implicature: “These are parts of the meanings of utterances which, although intended, are not strictly part of ‘what is said’ in the act of utterance, nor do they follow logically from what is said. There are

two basic sorts of implicature: (a) those which have a stable association with particular linguistic expressions (conventional implicatures), such as the element of surprise associated with yet in Haven’t you finished yet? (speaker does not actually say he or she is surprised), and (b) those which must be inferred, and for which contextual information is crucial (conversational implicatures)” (Cruse 85)

4. Common ground: “This refers to aspects of knowledge that participants in an act of communication assume to be shared and therefore do not need to be spelled out. It includes what can be perceived in the immediate context, together with knowledge of the language, general world knowledge, shared attitudes, and so on” (Cruse 28).

5. Quantity polarity: “Quantity polarity applies particularly to antonym pairs, where the positive term indicates ‘more of’ some property and the negative term ‘less of’, as with long (positive) and short (negative)” (Cruse 131).

6. Durative: “A durative verb denotes an action or process or state that is thought of as continuing over a period of time, rather than instantaneously.” (Cruse 53)

7. Correlative comparison: In grammar, a comparative correlative is a minor sentence pattern containing two corresponding phrases or clauses, each one headed by the and expressing a comparative: the X-er . . . the X-er or the X-er . . . the Y-er. The comparative correlative is also known as the correlative construction, the conditional comparative, or the “the . . . the” construction. Grammatically, the comparative correlative is a type of paired construction; rhetorically, the comparative correlative is often (but not always) a type of comparison.

8. Animacy: “A property of nouns which is reflected in the grammar of many languages. It may, for instance, determine pronominal reference, use of classifiers, the order of elements, the distribution of inflectional categories such as number, and so on.

The basic animacy distinction is between living and non-living things, but the linguistic distinction between animate and inanimate often does not match the scientific one.” (Cruse 12).

9.Utterance meaning: “Utterance meaning is the meaning a sentence carries when it is used in a particular context, with referents assigned to all referring expressions, and taking into account any conversational implicatures” (Cruse 164).

10.Context: “An essential factor in the interpretation of utterances and expressions. The most important aspects of context are: (1) preceding and following utterances and/or expressions (‘co-text’), (2) the immediate physical situation, (3) the wider situation, including social and power relations, and (4) knowledge presumed shared between speaker and hearer” (Cruse 35).

11.Anaphor: “An anaphor is an expression that must be interpreted via another expression - the ‘antecedent, which typically occurs earlier in the discourse. The term ‘anaphora’ refers to this phenomenon” (Cruse 12).

12.Ambiguity: “An expression (strictly, an expression form) is said to be ambiguous if it has more than one possible distinct meaning” (Cruse 10).

13.Logical polarity: “Logical polarity is based on the principle that ‘two negatives make a positive’. For instance, It’s true that it’s true is equivalent to It’s true, but It’s false that it’s false changes polarity and is equivalent to It’s true. From this we can conclude that false is the negative term and true is positive” (Cruse 130).

14.Discourse markers: “A category of expressions which includes such items as well, oh, then, so, but. They are grammatically optional, in that omitting them does not result in ungrammaticality, and they mark boundaries between units of discourse. Among their typical functions are 1. They carry expressive meaning (they may also have propositional meaning). 2. They contribute to, or emphasize

coherence relations in discourse.3. They act as constraints on relevance” (Cruse 51).

15.Vantage point or point of view: “The way something is described can depend on the position of the speaker relative to the thing being described” (Cruse 189).

16.Discourse Topic: According to Keenan and Schieffelin, “topics in conversations can be derived and claim that any discourse has a single proposition which represents the discourse topic” (1976: 338). The listener establishes discourse topic by reconstructing the semantic relations between referents. Van Dijk proposes that for written texts, discourse topic can be constructed on the basis of the analysis that underlies the text. Discourse topics for many sentences have been proposed by Asher and Lascarides in the following sentence: I have just arrived. The camel is outside. From this the receiver recovers the discourse topic “transportation”.

17.Complementarity: “Complementarity is a type of oppositeness. Complementary terms divide a domain into two mutually exclusive sub-domains: if something belongs to the domain, then it must fall under one or other of the terms. Complementaries have a contradictory relation. So, for example, if something is not dead it must be alive, and if it is not alive then it must be dead, and it is anomalous to say of an organism that it is neither dead nor alive. This establishes dead and alive as complementaries.” (Cruse 2006 28).

REFERENCE

- [1] Cruse, Allen. (2006). A Glossary of Semantics and Pragmatics. Edinburgh: EUP:. 2006. Print.
- [2] Nordquist, Richard. “Comparative Correlative (grammar)” grammar. about, <http://grammar.about.com/od/c/g/Comparative-Correlatives.htm>
- [3] Mani, Inderjeet. Automatic Summarization. John Benjamin: Amsterdam & Philadelphia. 2000. Print.

- [4] McArthur, Tom & McArthur, Roshan, eds. The Oxford Companion to the English Language. OUP: Oxford, New York, 1992. Print.
- [5] Muller, Simone. Discourse Markers in Native and Non-native English Discourse. John Bejamin: Oxford, Philadelphia. 2005. Print.
- [6] Peirce, Charles S., Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce, eds. Charles Hartshorne, Paul Weiss, and Arthur Burks, 8 vols, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, pp. 1931-66. Print.