

Textual Cognetics & the Role of Iconic Linkage in Software User Guides

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates whether Iconic Linkage - the use of the identical wording to present the same information recurring in a text - can improve the usability of user guides, whether they are original language or translated versions. Drawing on research in technical communication, cognitive psychology and human-computer interaction, Iconic Linkage is presented as a writing strategy that potentially allows users to work more quickly and effectively and which promotes better retention of information. The usefulness of Iconic Linkage was tested in a laboratory-based usability study that combined objective task-based evaluation with users' subjective evaluations of a software program used in recording parliamentary debates. A post-test survey designed to test subjects' retention of information contained in the user guides was also administered. The study shows that Iconic Linkage significantly improved usability of the user guide: in all tasks, subjects worked more effectively and made fewer mistakes, while in the three timed tasks, subjects completed the tasks much more quickly. Subjects also gave higher ratings for the software and their retention of information was noticeably improved. The study concludes by discussing the implications and potential future applications of this research.

KEYWORDS: cognitive psychology, evaluation, iconic linkage, technical communication, technical translation, usability, user guides.

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