

Text and Talk

Martin Nystrand (with contributions by Margaret Himley and Anne Doyle)
The Structure of Written Communication: Studies in Reciprocity Between Writers and Readers
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Review by
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The relation between writing and speech is one of the more intriguing puzzles in social history and in current thought. Although competence with a written language has long been taken as a significant feature of sophisticated thought and advanced societies, contemporary thought about language, beginning with de Saussure and Chomsky, has focused almost entirely on structure rather than function while it has dismissed the "tyranny of writing" as a mistaken attention to mere transcription. The attention to structure has enhanced our appreciation of unwritten languages as well as of the human minds that acquire and use them, but it has tended to eclipse the traditional concern with the uses of language and with the ways that speech and writing serve their diverse functions. In correcting this imbalance, some recent studies of speech and writing, or "orality" and "literacy," have argued that writing is both structurally and functionally equivalent to speech; others have argued that writing, both historically and developmentally, facilitates the development of more specialized intellectual functions while serving existing functions in new ways.

In *The Structure of Written Communication: Studies in Reciprocity Between Writers and Readers*, Nystrand, with some contributions from Himley and Doyle, argues that there is one fundamental principle, common to speech and writing, that is the key to the construction and understanding of written texts, namely, the principle of reciprocity between writer and reader. Writers, like speakers, are successful to the extent that

they can anticipate and attune their texts to the requirements of their listeners or readers. This principle originated in theories of rhetoric, essentially theories of persuasion, which are concerned with what are technically known as "perlocutionary effects." But it is a principle that is also basic to conversational analysts such as Schegloff and Sachs and to intentionalist philosophers such as Grice, who refer to it as the principle of "recipient design" and as the cooperative principle, respectively. It is a good principle.

Although the principle was initially worked out for oral discourse, Nystrand adopts it without qualification for written texts. "Writers must initiate and sustain conditions of reciprocity between themselves and their readers." Again, "When writers strike a careful balance between their own expressive needs and the expectations of their readers, the result is clear communication and lucid text" (p. 72). In writing, as in speech, writers negotiate meanings with the readers in the way that speakers work out agreements and disagreements, even if they are dramatically separated in space and time. The primary option available to writers when they anticipate that they may be violating the reader's expectations is to elaborate (in fact, I have had conversations with such people!) and thereby to regain reciprocity.

Nystrand uses this perspective to develop a number of points. He advances a rhetorical theory of text meaning, the theory that the meaning of a text is not "a property of the text" but "comes about phenomenally when readers activate the semantic potential of the text"; that is,

"meaning results when writers create texts which are properly attuned to their contexts of their use" (p. 120). Texts that are not properly attuned presumably have no meaning. This view is used to slay the dragon of "autonomous meaning," the notion advanced by Nystrand's former colleague, David Olson, to the effect that texts have a meaning independent of the authorial intention of their writers and the diverse interpretations of their readers. The doctrine of autonomous texts suffers from three flaws, according to Nystrand. It assumes that whereas speech is contextualized, texts are decontextualized, to which Nystrand replies that all language has a context; it is agreement on context that makes texts interpretable. Second, it claims that one consequence of the autonomy of text is that texts came to be written in a way that fixes interpretation by reducing potential ambiguities, whereas, according to Nystrand, all language is open to interpretation, the degree of openness depending not on the text but on agreement on relevant contextual evidence. He cites difficulties of interpretation surrounding the most carefully worded texts, such as legal agreements, as cases in point. Third, the argument about the autonomy of text compares essayist text with conversation, whereas a more relevant comparison would be with other formalized oral forms, such as rituals or myth.

(If Olson had been asked, he would have replied that the claim about the "meaning in the text" or "autonomous meaning" should be read [who knows what his intentions were other than that they were honorable] as the claim that texts are not merely transcribed utterances, that texts are created artifacts that have certain objective properties that are invariant across the intentions of the writer and the interpretations of the readers. These properties are what give rise to the attempts at revision on the part of writers and to the activities of interpretation on the part of readers. Furthermore, whereas he would have granted that texts are not without contexts, he would have insisted that they are still not comparable to utterances in that the context for texts is *other* texts, thereby making an archival tradition possible. Third, he would have agreed that in the future, comparisons between spoken and written forms should honor categories of genre. But he wasn't asked.)

Furthermore, to empirically examine the claim that the meaning of a text is not intrinsic to a text but is negotiated between reader and writer, Nystrand con-