

The Structure of Written Communication

Studies in Reciprocity
between Writers and Readers

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1986



ACADEMIC PRESS, INC.

Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers

Orlando San Diego New York Austin
Boston London Sydney Tokyo Toronto

Rommetveit and Kleiven (1968) found that when rival pairs of words are presented (e.g., *soup* and *soap*), subjects will see the word more closely related in meaning to the word which immediately precedes it (e.g., *towel* or *spoon*). The conclusions in all these studies and many others (e.g., Reicher, 1969; Tulving & Gold, 1963; Wittrock, Marks, and Doctrow, 1975; Bransford and Johnson, 1972) are the same: Comprehension is always affected by previous text and expected text, as well as the nonverbal context in which the text is situated. Comprehension is the process whereby words emerge as meaningful constructs from otherwise empty perceptual forms.

From such research, we have learned that reading is a process whereby, ironically, the reader gains information by eliminating possible meanings (cf. Smith, 1971). Readers gain knowledge by discarding possibilities, not adding them. Any term out of context (*war*, *cousin Matilda*, *winter*) has numerous if not infinite possible meanings and interpretations. But rarely, of course, do readers and listeners encounter such terms in isolation. Instead they find them associated with other words in some context of use. And their comprehension of the terms is quite literally loaded in terms of other terms. Readers comprehend texts largely by finding out what topics they are *not* about, using sufficient context to eliminate spurious interpretations and retain only the most salient. In this process, readers work their way into and through the text, processing each layer of context in terms of expectations set up by the previous layer. Hence, as I reach into my locked box rather than the pigeonhole, I eliminate some possibilities; as I note how the envelope is addressed, I eliminate yet more possibilities; and so on and so forth as I work my way through the text itself.

As each layer of text and context is processed, it constrains or **frames** the possibilities for interpretation of the next layer. Readers' expectations are increasingly "fine tuned" as they work their way into the text. In effect, everything understood defines new horizons of expectations as previous text becomes context for interpreting text yet to be read. Through the cognitive transformation of comprehension, each layer of understanding becomes the ground against which the figure of subsequent text takes shape and has meaning.

What Writers Do

INITIATING DISCOURSE

If reading is a process of eliminating alternative meanings and interpretive possibilities, then writing is the complementary and reciprocal process of elaborating these possibilities, associative paths, and interpretive contexts. The writer gets the reader off and running by setting the text in one particular direction rather than another, i.e., by loading the communication in favor of certain possibilities and interpretive contexts rather than others.

The start of a text performs this function quite directly. A professional journal article titled "The Effects of Text Editing on the Cognitive Processes of First Graders" announces a different kind of text than a newspaper article in the Modern Living Section titled "Byting Bits in First Grade." These titles indicate to readers just how they should proceed to read what they find there. Among other things, readers must have some insight about the relative importance of understanding details. In reading the newspaper piece, "Byting Bits in First Grade," all the reader really needs to get is the main idea whereas with the research article on "The Effects of Text Editing on the Cognitive Processes of First Graders," far more than just the main idea is at stake. To fully understand this latter piece, the reader must know about computers, text editing, and cognitive psychology. But note that to understand these respective texts, knowledge of the topic is not sufficient. Comprehension requires not just understanding what a writer says about a topic; comprehension also requires understanding what sort of text the writer has chosen to write and being able to evaluate the relevance of details in terms of the purpose of the genre. Hence, to properly understand "Byting Bits" and "The Effects of Text Editing," readers not only need to have

some understanding of computers; they also need to know how to read articles about computers.

As we have seen, however, the skilled reader begins deducing the meaning of the text prior to reading the text itself, using a myriad of "pretextual" clues for this purpose. Knowing this, the skilled writer is able to exploit the entire range of such possibilities to advantage. In business communications, for example, skilled memo writers (and their secretaries) give due attention to such things as the formality of the communication; the signature of the author (first name only?); type of stationery (with or without logo); manner mailed (first class, overnight express, special delivery with return request for time of delivery); and who is indicated (and who is not indicated) as receiving carbon copies. Skilled business writers know full well that each of these factors is potentially important in indicating to readers just how they are to interpret the text. Each of the factors, especially when used in conjunction with others, is available to the writer for elaborating just what sort of communication is under way.

It is important to note that the many factors that contribute to what writers have to say and what they say about it are meaningful in different ways. For example, "Sincerely yours" is *meaningful but nonreferential*. In addition, some of these "meanings" are *indexical* (e.g., "Cordially" versus "Sincerely yours," my locked mailbox versus open pigeonhole are indexes since their meaning depends not on their referential content per se but rather on some significant aspect of the context they bring to bear on the interpretation of the text). The reader uses all of these factors of text and context, including referential and nonreferential elements, various indexes, etc., to gauge just what the text is about (i.e., **discourse topic**) and exactly what the writer has to say about it (i.e., **discourse comment**). In return, writers depend on their readers' predictable uses of such factors to make things known with the idiosyncratic resources of written text.

The skilled business writer also knows that each of these elements has interpretive value with respect to other, previous uses, which set interpretive precedents for the reader. Hence, in an office where formal memos are the norm, the informality of a note from an employer to an employee will carry meaning in and of itself. The reverse is true, too: In an office where the norm is informal communication, the sudden appearance of a sealed memo will also have meaning.

Of course, the text itself is the chief vehicle for written communication and the *raison d'être* for all the pretextual clues. In addition to genre conventions which indicate *what sort of communication* is under way (e.g., essay rather than memo; memo rather than note; an important note rather than obligatory note), the writer also has access to various resources of text which allow for message construction in no uncertain terms. It is in

the text proper, of course, that the writer proceeds to indicate just *what sort of topic* he has in mind and *what sort of comment* he wishes to make about the topic. This is not to say, of course, that composing always proceeds linearly in terms of genre, topic, and comment, but rather that writers are constrained in their composing by these factors which figure prominently in the ultimate meaning of the text.

TEXT ELABORATIONS: GENRE, TOPIC, AND COMMENT

Very generally, we may summarize the communicative options and strategies of the writer by noting that the skilled writer establishes (a) what sort of text is under way, (b) what sort of topic is under discussion, and (c) exactly what he wishes to say about it. In other words, the writer proceeds by elaborating at the levels of (a) genre, (b) topic, and (c) comment. Elaboration at each of these levels progressively constrains the interpretive possibilities of the subsequent level, and when elaboration at each level is sufficient, the writer leaves the reader with no uncertainty about the meaning (the point or gist) of the communication.

To examine these concepts in more detail, consider Thomas S. Szasz's essay, "The Myth of Mental Illness," originally published in *The American Psychologist* in 1960.

The Myth of Mental Illness

THOMAS S. SZASZ

My aim in this essay is to raise the question "Is there such a thing as mental illness?" and to argue that there is not. Since the notion of mental illness is extremely widely used nowadays, inquiry into the ways in which this term is employed would seem to be especially indicated. Mental illness, of course, is not literally a "thing" — or physical object — and hence it can "exist" only in the same sort of way in which other theoretical concepts exist. Yet, familiar theories are in the habit of posing, sooner or later — at least to those who come to believe in them — as "objective truths" (or "facts"). During certain historical periods, explanatory conceptions such as deities, witches, and microorganisms appeared not only as theories but as self-evident causes of a vast number of events. I submit that today mental

From "The Myth of Mental Illness" by Thomas Szasz, *The American Psychologist*, Vol. 15, pp. 113–118. Copyright 1960 by the American Psychological Association. Reprinted by permission of the American Psychological Association and Dr. Thomas Szasz.

illness is widely regarded in a somewhat similar fashion, that is, as the cause of innumerable diverse happenings. As an antidote to the complacent use of the notion of mental illness — whether as a self-evident phenomenon, theory, or cause — let us ask this question: What is meant when it is asserted that someone is mentally ill?

In what follows I shall describe briefly the main uses to which the concept of mental illness has been put. I shall argue that this notion has outlived whatever usefulness it might have had and that it now functions merely as a convenient myth.

Mental Illness as a Sign of Brain Disease

The notion of mental illness derives its main support from such phenomena as syphilis of the brain or delirious conditions — intoxications, for instance — in which persons are known to manifest various peculiarities or disorders of thinking and behavior. Correctly speaking, however, these are diseases of the brain, not of the mind. According to one school of thought, *all* so-called mental illness is of this type. The assumption is made that some neurological defect, perhaps a very subtle one, will ultimately be found for all the disorders of thinking and behavior. Many contemporary psychiatrists, physicians, and other scientists hold this view. This position implies that people *cannot* have troubles — expressed in what are now called “mental illnesses” — because of differences in personal needs, opinions, social aspirations, values, and so on. *All problems in living* are attributed to physicochemical processes which in due time will be discovered by medical research.

“Mental illnesses” are thus regarded as basically no different than all other diseases (that is, of the body). The only difference, in this view, between mental and bodily diseases is that the former, affecting the brain, manifest themselves by means of mental symptoms; whereas the latter, affecting other organ systems (for example, the skin, liver, etc.), manifest themselves by means of symptoms referable to those parts of the body. This view rests on and expresses what are, in my opinion, two fundamental errors.

In the first place, what central nervous system symptoms would correspond to a skin eruption or a fracture? It would *not* be some emotion or complex bit of behavior. Rather, it would be blindness or a paralysis of some part of the body. The crux of the matter is that a disease of the brain, analogous to a disease of the skin or bone, is a neurological defect, and not a problem in living. For example, a *defect* in a person’s visual field may be satisfactorily explained by correlating it with certain definite lesions in the nervous system. On the other hand, a person’s *belief* — whether this be a

belief in Christianity, in Communism, or in the idea that his internal organs are “rotting” and that his body is, in fact, already “dead” — cannot be explained by a defect or disease of the nervous system. Explanations of this sort of occurrence — assuming that one is interested in the belief itself and does not regard it simply as a “symptom” or expression of something else that is *more interesting* — must be sought along different lines.

The second error in regarding complex psychosocial behavior, consisting of communications about ourselves and the world about us, as mere symptoms of neurological functioning is *epistemological*. In other words, it is an error pertaining not to any mistakes in observation or reasoning, as such, but rather to the way in which we organize and express our knowledge. In the present case, the error lies in making a symmetrical dualism between mental and physical (or bodily) symptoms, a dualism which is merely a habit of speech and to which no known observations can be found to correspond. Let us see if this is so. In medical practice, when we speak of physical disturbances, we mean either signs (for example, a fever) or symptoms (for example, pain). We speak of mental symptoms, on the other hand, when we refer to a patient’s *communications about himself, others, and the world about him*. He might state that he is Napoleon or that he is being persecuted by the Communists. These would be considered mental symptoms *only* if the observer believed that the patient was *not* Napoleon or that he was *not* being persecuted by the Communists. This makes it apparent that the statement that “X is a mental symptom” involves rendering a judgment. The judgment entails, moreover, a covert comparison or matching of the patient’s ideas, concepts, or beliefs with those of the observer and the society in which they live. The notion of mental symptom is therefore inextricably tied to the *social* (including *ethical*) context in which it is made in much the same way as the notion of bodily symptom is tied to an *anatomical* and *genetic* context (Szasz, 1957a, 1957b).

To sum up what has been said thus far: I have tried to show that for those who regard mental symptoms as signs of brain disease, the concept of mental illness is unnecessary and misleading. For what they mean is that people so labeled suffer from diseases of the brain; and, if that is what they mean, it would seem better for the sake of clarity to say that and not something else.

Mental Illness as a Name for Problems in Living

The term “mental illness” is widely used to describe something which is very different than a disease of the brain. Many people today take it for granted that living is an arduous process. Its hardship for modern man,

moreover, derives not so much from a struggle for biological survival as from the stresses and strains inherent in the social intercourse of complex human personalities. In this context, the notion of mental illness is used to identify or describe some feature of an individual's so-called personality.

It is the context of this essay, specifically the scholarly forum of the professional journal, that largely sets the tone and indicates to readers just what sort of communication is under way. Readers know even as they open the cover that this will not be satire, fiction, or irony. The text is precisely the serious discussion of the idea announced in the title and restated explicitly in the first sentence: "My aim in this essay is to raise the question 'Is there such a thing as mental illness?' and to argue that there is not." As with most academic journal articles, the type of text, which is principally established by the context of the journal, is never at issue. Hence, the author need not establish in the text itself just what sort of text he is writing.

By the end of the first sentence, we know not only (a) what sort of text we are reading (serious academic essay) but also (b) the general topic, i.e., what the author mainly wants to discuss (the concept of mental illness) and (c) his general comment about this topic, i.e., what he mainly wants to say about it (it's a myth). But the essay continues beyond the first sentence, of course, and the author explains the many reasons why he believes mental illness is a myth. The general topic has many subtopics, and the author has many comments about each one of them.

In this particular essay, **topical elaboration** proceeds systematically and explicitly in separate subsections, each one with its own subheading, introduction, development and summary. For example, the topic of the first subdivision, like the one that follows it, is announced by a subheading ("Mental Illness as a Sign of Brain Disease"), and the author's comment about this topic is clear within the first two sentences (organic neurological disorders are diseases of the brain, not of the mind). The section is explicitly summarized in the last paragraph of the section ("To sum up: . . ."). The next section ("Mental Illness as a Name for Problems in Living") is similarly structured.

In contrast to these topical elaborations, the author elaborates the text "locally" when he treats technical terms and complicated concepts and terms with definitions, examples, and illustrations. For example, upon the mention of "neurological defect," he quickly explains the term by writing, "For example, a *defect* in a person's visual field may be satisfactorily explained by correlating it with certain definite lesions in the nervous system." Similarly, when he argues that the tendency to regard complex psychosocial behavior . . . as mere symptoms of neurological functioning" is

an "*epistemological*" error, he not only defines the term but he does so with a contrast: "In other words, it is an error pertaining not to any mistakes in observation or reasoning, as such, but rather to the way in which we organize and express our knowledge." Many of these elaborations are parenthetical clarifications, e.g., "In medical practice, when we speak of physical disturbances, we mean either signs (for example, a fever) or symptoms (for example, pain)" and "The notion of mental symptom is therefore inextricably tied to the *social* (including *ethical*) context in which it is made in much the same way as the notion of bodily symptom is tied to an *anatomical* and *genetic* context." All of these **lexical elaborations** address potential **troublesources** throughout the text.

Figure 3.1 shows lexical elaborations in paragraph 6 of Szasz's essay. At each point, the author proceeds by elaboration of text. The large-scale elaborations are more topical in nature than the "local" elaborations, which are more lexical. The author uses the former elaborations to stake out the topic, which is to say, by means of these topical elaborations, the writer establishes a mutual frame of reference, focusing the readers' attention on the topic in certain ways rather than others. By contrast, the lexical elaborations treat potential troublesources (e.g., they define technical terms or explain obscure concepts).

The title and initial thesis statement in this particular essay put the writer and reader on the same footing; they "anchor" the discourse by tapping a mutual frame of reference. In elaborating the particular topical possibilities that he does, Szasz "pushes" the discourse to the edges of the mutual frame of reference. That is to say, he introduces information that is sufficiently new so as to be potentially troublesome and require clarification. Such clarification is appropriate in several places and takes several forms. It is appropriate at the start of each new section and takes the form of explicit subtitles and introductory remarks. It is appropriate periodically with the lesser shifts in the topic that coincide with the starts of paragraphs and are so marked by indenting. And it is appropriate with the introduction of technical terms and is achieved by use of definitions, contrasts, illustrations, and parenthetical explanations.

TOPIC AND COMMENT

The relation of topic and comment has been the subject of considerable research by Prague School linguists, in the work of Mathesius, Firbas, and Daneš, as well as in other, more recent work by Halliday and psychologists interested in discourse processes. While most of this research has been at

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Figure 3.1. Text elaborations in paragraph of Szasz's "The Myth of Mental Illness."

consisting of communications about ourselves and the world about us, in other words, it is an error pertaining not to any mistakes in observation or reasoning, as such, but rather to the way in which we organize and express our knowledge.

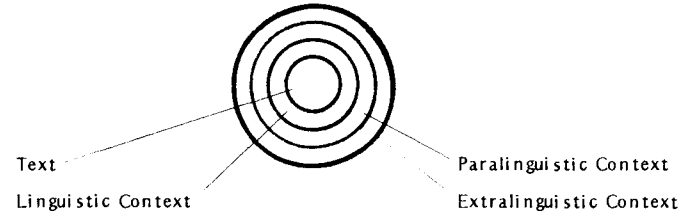


Figure 3.2. The concentric organization of text and context.

the level of the sentence, there are many important concepts in this literature that are germane to the study of extended texts.

From the time of its first congress in 1929 [Prague School 1978], Prague School linguists have focused their efforts on studying language in use, i.e., language in communicative contexts. This has been true even at the level of sentence analysis, which, in contrast to American studies of syntactic structure (e.g., Chomsky, 1957) and semantic structure (e.g., Fillmore, 1968; Kintsch, 1974), has been directly concerned with characterizing the organization of utterances and ultimately articulating a theory of utterance (Daneš, 1966). Unlike linguists in the tradition of Bloomfield, Prague linguists have not viewed linguistic performance as a set of confounding variables, nor have they viewed issues of pragmatics and language use as ripe for investigation only after securing advances in syntax and semantics. Rather, they have sought—in principle, theory, and method—to investigate language at the level of use and interpret the significance of language variables accordingly.

For the Prague School, the communicative value and function of words is in terms of other words, and the communicative value and function of texts is in relation to other texts (e.g., preceding text) and context (e.g., the setting in which the communication takes place). In these functional terms, communication and discourse always involve hierarchies of embedded elements (see Figure 3.2).

FUNCTIONAL SENTENCE PERSPECTIVE

This emphasis on understanding language in context is apparent especially in Prague approaches to sentences, a school of thought known as *Functional Sentence Perspective* (FSP). Mathesius (1939), for example, contrasted (a) "the starting point of the utterance" or "that which is known or at least obvious in the given situation and from which the speaker proceeds" with (b) "the core of the utterance" which is "what the speaker states about,

or in regard to, the starting point of the utterance [cited in Daneš, 1974].” Mathesius called this starting point the **theme** of the sentence and the latter, remaining portion the **enunciation**. In the first sentence of this paragraph, for example, the theme is *This emphasis on understanding language in context* and the enunciation is *is apparent especially in Prague approaches to sentences, a school of thought known as Functional Sentence Perspective (FSP)*. Normally, Mathesius argued, theme precedes the enunciation, which is to say given information normally precedes new information. In later discussions by others, including Firbas (1964) and Daneš (1974), these concepts are called **theme** and **rheme**. In other treatments of these concepts by non-Prague linguists, they are called **topic** and **comment**.

Mathesius’ twin criteria for *theme*—namely (a) that the theme identifies something that is known by speaker and listener and (b) that the theme is that part of the sentence from which the speaker proceeds—are potentially at odds with each other as Trávniček (1962) and Firbas (1966) point out. The difficulty is especially obvious at the start of a communication in which the speaker asserts something that is *not* known but which the speaker means to explain. Indeed, an important distinction between the first sentence and subsequent sentences of any text is that the first sentence must situate the reader, usually by *initiating* a common frame of reference whereas the subsequent text must *sustain* this frame of reference (cf. Benes, 1959). In Szasz’s essay, for example, the theme of his first sentence (*My aim in this essay*) is in fact not known until we complete the sentence (*My aim in this essay is to raise the question “Is there such a thing as mental illness?” and to argue that there is not*) and continue the essay.

As an alternative to Mathesius’ definition of theme as known information, Firbas proposed his concept of **communicative dynamism** (CD). Communicative dynamism refers to “the extent to which any sentence element contributes to the development of the communication, to which it ‘pushes the communication forward,’ as it were [1966, p. 270.]” For example, imagine that I mention to you that I’ve heard that your father is visiting next week. If you were to ask me how I learned this and I replied *Your father wrote me a letter*, then *Your father* would be the theme of the sentence not (a) because it is the first element in the sentence and not just (b) because it expresses known information but rather (c) because, compared to the remainder of the sentence (the rheme: *wrote me a letter*), it contributes less to the overall movement of the communication. Hence, as in the above example, it is entirely possible for the theme of a sentence to express new information “although any element conveying known information has to be regarded as thematic [Firbas, 1966, p. 255].” The expression of known information is thematic because it contributes less information than the

remainder of the sentence, the rheme. But just as “thematic” cannot be equated with “known” information, Firbas argues, “‘rhematic’ cannot be equated with ‘unknown,’ [or] ‘new’ . . . although rhematic elements always convey new information [Firbas, 1966, p. 255].” This definition of theme and rheme in terms of their relative contribution to the communicative dynamism of the text is important because it avoids the problems of approaches that define theme and rheme (as well as given and new information) in terms of particular syntactic structures, namely aligning theme and given information with syntactic subject, and rheme and new information with syntactic predicate.

THEMATIC PROGRESSIONS AND GRAMMATICALITY OF TEXT

It was František Daneš (1964, 1974) who showed how the dynamics of given–new information, as it is expressed in the theme–rheme relationships of individual sentences, can be applied to the structure of extended texts. He did this by showing that in well-formed texts, the theme–rheme relationships of individual sentences build on each other in sequences which he called **progressions**. For example, in the sentence pair, *I’m studying physics this term. It’s hard*, the theme of the second sentence (*It*) reiterates the rheme of the first sentence (*physics*). In so doing the second sentence continues in effect to comment upon the assertion begun in the first sentence. That is to say, the second sentence elaborates upon the first. This particular thematic progression, which Daneš called a **simple linear progression**, is one of three types he identified. Altogether the three kinds are as follows:

1. **Simple linear progression**, where the thematic information of a sentence is the same as the rhematic information of the preceding sentence;
2. **Constant theme, or run-through progression**, where the thematic information of a sentence is the same as the thematic information of the preceding sentence; and
3. **Derived theme progression**, where the thematic information is the same for a sequence of sentences but this information is implied, not stated.

Daneš’s classification of the ways in which sentences build upon each other is important because it demonstrates the viability of the given–new distinction in the analysis of extended texts and provides a vocabulary for discussing the patterning of information in any given text. It also separates

the issue of information from orthographic boundaries, as Witte (1983) points out. Nonetheless, the classification does not in and of itself provide a grammar, which is to say, whereas it allows the description of texts in terms of particular thematic progressions, it offers no general principles with respect to permissible and nonpermissible text sequences. For example, each of the following sequences is an example of a run-through progression: The thematic information is identical in each sentence pair. Yet the second sequence, if read as a complete text, I submit, is ungrammatical and would be rejected as it stands by most readers:

Text 3.1. *The tree is living. It is in bloom.*

Text 3.2. *The tree is living. It is dead.*

While there are many possible grounds, including both logic and grammar, for discarding the second text as unacceptable, thematic progression is not one of them. What principles determine particular progressions in well-formed texts? What characterizes a grammatical rheme? Is there any way to characterize the constraints on the enunciation of one theme rather than another especially in terms of sentences as they relate to each other? When are particular thematic progressions preferable to others? What criteria might be used to characterize preferred progressions?

For a text linguist, identifying thematic progressions without specifying how they typically relate to each other is comparable to linguists' identifying nouns and verbs without specifying how nouns and verbs typically relate: Such description is pretheoretical. Daneš (1974) notes this limitation in applying Functional Sentence Perspective to the analysis of whole texts when he notes the need "to find out the principles exactly according to which this and not another portion of the mass of known information has been selected. In other words, we have to inquire into the principles underlying thematic choice and thematic progression [p. 112]." Without such principles, a theory of utterance—Saussure's long elusive account of *la parole*—is, of course, impossible.

In Daneš's third progression type, the sentences of some texts are related to a derived theme or **hypertheme**, Daneš's term for the central idea of any text in which this idea is not stated explicitly. An example is a paragraph with a thesis but no explicit thesis statement. In what sort of text may the writer merely imply the thesis, i.e., proceed hyperthematically? By contrast, when is an implied thesis inadequate? When is it important to state a thesis explicitly? What principles of discourse are relevant to this distinction? In an insightful analysis of expository writing, Witte (1983) shows that these hyperthemes, or **discourse topics** as he calls them, are derived not from the text alone "but from the interaction of the text with the reader's prior

knowledge [p. 316]." Whereas knowledgeable readers might find the explicit statement of the main idea in such text unnecessary or even superfluous, unknowledgeable readers are obviously at a loss without an explicit statement since they have no way to find out what is only implied.

This conclusion is consistent with my analysis of lexical elaborations (Nystrand, 1981). I note that skilled writers elaborate potentially troublesome parts of texts according to the terms of the given–new contract and the general requirements for semantic coherence. These elaborations are carefully keyed to those terms and concepts which are critical to reader comprehension; their purpose is to "buttress" the text in precisely those spots which threaten common categorizations and reciprocity between writer and reader, in effect providing explicit bridges (cf. Haviland and Clark, 1974) between precisely those propositions and assertions whose relations readers might otherwise miss.

NOTES TOWARD A RECIPROCITY-BASED TEXT GRAMMAR

Fundamental Axiom: A given text is functional to the extent that it balances the reciprocal needs of the writer for expression and of the reader for comprehension. Communicative homeostasis is the normal condition of grammatical texts.

It might seem that, aside from certain essential prescriptions for "correct prose," there are no rules determining what such prose might be; that certainly there are no descriptive rules or principles which might be said to characterize, if not govern, the matter of generating and elaborating text; that indeed composing is a new enterprise every time, always requiring the writer to find appropriate forms to fit given occasions, subjects, and individual purposes. As Michael Stubbs puts it, "It is easy to get the impression that discourse analysis is at least a foolhardy, if not a quite impossible undertaking, and that expanding the narrow range of phenomena that linguists study to include natural language in use causes all hell to break loose [1983, p. 15]."

But every written text is not wholly idiosyncratic. And it is my purpose, like Stubbs', to show that "the chaos can be contained," that "in fact, only some hell breaks loose [p. 15]." The constant in the equation of discourse is reciprocity, the underlying premise that the text generated must result in shared knowledge between writer and reader. Hence, what counts is not simply what the text says but how what is said relates to what is already shared by writer and reader. In effect, a coherent text secures a balance

between the needs of the writer on the one hand to say something and the expectations of the reader on the other hand for a certain kind of text. This is merely another way of saying that writers must initiate and sustain conditions of reciprocity between themselves and their readers if their communication is to be coherent. Texts function and are lucid to the extent that this balance is maintained; they are unclear and dysfunctional to the extent that it is not. And this is precisely why writers are obliged to be explicit about their topics with unknowledgeable readers in a way that they are not with knowledgeable readers.

The text is obviously central to the interaction between writer and reader. It is the bridge between the producer and receiver in both spoken and written communication. 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. This comes about when the writer's elaboration of text meaning matches readers' requirements for eliminating potential meanings. It is essential that what the writer says complements what readers bring to the text.

Choice Point Corollary: Potential troublesources which threaten reciprocity define choice points for the writer. Options Corollary: Text options at each choice point are text elaborations.

Whenever the terms of reciprocity are threatened or jeopardized by the introduction of new information, the writer may restore the balance by elaborating. E. Ochs (in press) recently argues that speakers will vary in the extent to which they assume the burden of making sense of each other and that this variation is largely related to the respective social rank or status of the speakers. Hence, some writers and speakers (e.g., assistant professors and children) may be more obliged to explain troublesources than others (e.g., full professors and parents). Nonetheless, to the extent that writers deal with potential troublesources, their options consist of various text elaborations. For example, explicit statement of the discourse topic—for example a title or a thesis statement or a suitable introduction—serves exactly this function for unknowledgeable readers. So too do definitions and illustrations of technical terms and troublesome concepts.

How much and what sorts of elaboration are needed? And what determines which text structures to generate? Which one should come first, which next, and so on? How should a writer proceed? In the interests of communication, the writer will elaborate or “buttress” precisely those parts of the text where reciprocity is threatened. This is why close colleagues can identify themselves unambiguously with only initials (or less, e.g., handwriting alone) whereas other situations require more elaborate identifica-

tion. In either case, of course, the writer's purpose is the same: to provide unambiguous identification. But this purpose does not translate directly into any particular text structure. This is why *more text* is not categorically more adequate than *less text*. This is also why skilled technical writers carefully treat the points they do for nontechnical readers with definitions, examples, and illustrations. And it is one important reason why children's literature is so heavily illustrated. In all of these instances the text is the way it is because it effectively strikes a balance between the purposes of the writer and the expectations of the reader.

Often writers do not strike such a balance. For example, when a writer misjudges how much more he knows about a topic than the readers, the readers may be unable to follow him. The text is too dense, and either the reader feels the writer is “speeding” through the material without due consideration for the reader, or the reader feels he has chosen a text that is too advanced. There are other cases in which a text that might have been functional in its original time and place ceases to be for extraordinary reasons. For example, in the case of Chaucer's tales and Shakespeare's plays, where each writer masterfully matched his texts to his contemporary reader's expectations, the texts have outlived the readers for whom they were written. In such cases, readers may need to take a course in Chaucer or Shakespeare, and/or an editor may need to provide marginal glosses in order to revitalize the texts, making them function once again in terms of the author's original purpose and new readers' needs.

Misconstraint Corollary: Inadequate elaboration results in misconstraint, i.e., mismatch between the writer's expression and the reader's comprehension. Inadequate elaboration at the level of topic results in abstruse text. Inadequate elaboration at the level of comment results in ambiguous text. Inadequate elaboration at the level of genre results in misreading.

It is easy, of course, to blame everything on the writer and especially to point to certain text characteristics (such as complicated syntax and big words) as the source of the problem, and to the extent that the writer is responsible for initiating and sustaining the communication, this blame is well placed. But while the writer can rightly be held responsible for all manner of sins (of both omission and deed), the failure is not adequately explained in terms of the writer alone. Nor can readability be explained simply in terms of syntax and lexis. At its core, readability has to do with how the text works in terms of both the writer and its readers. Readability has to do with how the text functions as a medium of exchange between

writer and reader. Hence, the extent to which a text is lucid or turgid has less to do with a particular writer's expression in any categorical sense (or a particular reader's comprehension, for that matter) than it does with the presence or absence of interaction between the production skills of the one and the processing resources of the other. In terms of communication, writers and readers are not so much right or wrong in their expression and interpretations as they are *in or out of tune with each other*. When writers and readers are out of tune in this way, the result is mismatch, or **miskonstraint** (cf. Nystrand, 1979; 1982b).

In the case of **ambiguous text**, which is *a text that says too little about too many points*, the reader finds the text inadequately developed and its terms inadequately defined ("Tell me more"). Writers can revise ambiguous texts effectively by being *more specific* about points of ambiguity. In the case of **abstruse text**, which is *a text that says too much about too few points*, the reader finds the topic inadequately defined ("What is this about anyway?"). Writers can revise abstruse texts by effectively clarifying the topic, particularly at the start of the text. In a third kind of mismatch, the reader understands the topic of the text and each of the points made about the topic, but nonetheless misreads the writer's purpose. Examples include misperceived irony, e.g., concluding that the author of "A Modest Proposal" must have been pathologically insane or that *Animal Farm* is merely an innocent children's story.

In the first sort of mismatch, which results in ambiguity (and which I have elsewhere [1979, 1982b] called **rarefaction**), the problem is inadequate elaboration at the level of comment. In the second sort of mismatch, which results in abstruseness (and which I have elsewhere [1979, 1982b] called **impaction**), the problem is inadequate elaboration at the level of topic. Finally, in the third sort of mismatch, which results in misreading, the problem is inadequate elaboration at the level of genre: In not seeing the irony, in reading humor seriously, the reader understands what the writer says but doesn't understand what sort of text is "going on."

Masters of irony such as Swift and Orwell exploit readers' expectations for certain sorts of text. Consider Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal." On the one hand, we may wonder how readers detect the irony at all; it cannot be due to anything that Swift actually writes, certainly not in the first few pages. For Swift says virtually nothing to actually indicate that he is not serious about his proposal to control the population of Ireland by eating children. Perhaps most readers finally read the text as irony because proposals to eat children make sense only if the writer doesn't really mean it. But without knowing something beyond the text—about Swift and his times—there is no real way to know whether the author is brilliant because he is a lunatic or a satirist.

A more interesting issue is why readers invariably take Swift's proposals seriously at all. Why do naive readers not question the piece from the very start? (No one ever begins by asking, "How am I to read this?") The answer has to do with the fact that "A Modest Proposal" is exposition and that one of the fundamental expectations set up by the genre is the straightforward intent of the author—that is, as Olson (1977) puts it, essayists say what they mean and mean what they say. This aspect of exposition has nothing to do with anything the writer actually states; rather it is a fundamental characteristic of the genre. Readers read exposition on the premise that the writer is serious, and writers compose it on the premise that readers will so interpret it. Hence, genre is a way of elaborating not the text itself but rather the communicative event. Swift exploits his readers' expectations for exposition by framing a preposterous proposal in terms of this serious genre which sets reader expectations for measured, rational analysis. By the time readers detect the irony, they have experienced exactly what Swift wants—a penetrating revulsion toward certain forces in Irish society which he opposes.

From this analysis, we understand why nothing categorical can be said about the communicative function of any particular text structure per se. Long sentences are not categorically worse than short. Short words are not categorically better than long. And long sentences are not necessarily made better by making them short. The very examples and definitions that help some readers will confuse others. For example, the same explanations and court decision that might help attorneys understand current Supreme Court interpretations of tax shelters will overwhelm the general taxpayer. To understand tax shelters, general taxpayers need not greater detail but rather a general definition of terms, starting with the term "tax shelter." These readers need to "step back from the picture," not move more deeply into the frame.

Not all new information is equally new, of course. The newness of information is entirely related to what the reader knows *vis-à-vis* what the writer wants to say. Hence, some information, e.g., highly specialized and unfamiliar technical knowledge, is not just new; it is *extremely new*. If the writer introduces such highly new information without preparing or helping the reader upon introducing it, the reader is simply run over by the communicative dynamism of the text. Instead of pushing the communication forward, the writer pushes the reader over. In other words, any point in the communication which endangers or disrupts the established frame of reference is a **choice point** for the writer.

At each such choice point, which is a potential troublesource for readers, the writer has a variety of options, all of which involve a text elaboration of some sort. The most common sort of elaboration includes those mentioned

previously—glosses, definitions, examples, illustrations, and diagrams. Typically these “local” elaborations are introduced precisely at those points of text which are potential troublesources. The function of these constructions is to “buttress” the text at these points where the writer’s purpose and the readers’ needs may not be balance, i.e., where the terms of reciprocity are threatened.

Situation Corollary: The beginning of a text functions to situate the reader in terms of a mutual frame of reference.

In order for a text to function, the writer and reader must start on the same footing. Most fundamentally, the text establishes genre and consequently mode of interpretation, and if the text is informative, the beginning will normally situate the reader in terms of topic and comment quite directly. In some texts, this will be accomplished quite explicitly (e.g., Szasz’s *My aim in this essay is to raise the question “Is there such a thing as mental illness?” and to argue that there is not*). Interoffice memos typically establish this mutual frame of reference by identifying when (DATE:), who (TO: and FROM:), and what (RE:). Sometimes context plays an essential factor in situating the reader: Readers know what sort of text Szasz’ essay is, for example, largely because they find it published in *The American Psychologist*. And just what refrigerator-door notewriters write about and just how much they need say about it is largely determined by the fact that they may leave it on the refrigerator door and as a consequence can reasonably anticipate the expectations of the reader.

Elaboration Construction Corollary: Writers may elaborate texts at the level of genre, topic, and comment. Text elaborations in English include words, phrases, clauses, sentences, and paragraphs. Elaborations must be consistent with expectations initiated by the writer. Constructions which might fundamentally threaten reciprocity (i.e., complicate rather than clarify) may not be used.

A consequence of the fundamental axiom is that elaborations must be consistent with the expectations of the reader. Hence, elaborations must not complicate the text for the reader. That is, if the writer introduces a technical term for an audience of general readers, the lexical elaboration which treats the term may not be comparably technical. Rather, the elaboration must be an example, definition, or illustration which appropriately contextualizes the term or concept in terms of what the reader already knows or has come to understand from previous text.

Elaborating text, then, is not just a matter of saying more. In the case of genre, for example, writers typically clarify text type by saying things one way rather than another (e.g., “The Effects of Text Editing on Cognitive Processes” versus “Byting Bits in First Grade”). Elaborations may vary a great deal in construction and length. Sometimes an appropriate elaboration is nothing more than a qualifying adjective or phrase. Alternatively, elaborations may be clauses, sentences, whole paragraphs, even chapters, and, in extraordinary circumstances whole volumes (e.g., scholarly bibliographies which gloss historic texts).

Elaboration Episode Corollary: Elaborations which approach the limit of the reader’s capacity for processing information mark elaboration episodes which define new choice points for the writer and result in text segmentations (such as new paragraphs, sections, chapters, volumes, etc.).

A further consequence of the fundamental axiom is that the particular form of any coherent text will directly reflect a functional balance of given and new information. The degrees of communicative dynamism, of newness and givenness, moreover, are relative, and depend on the extent to which the speaker and listener share common understandings and the extent to which what the speaker says pushes the limits of this common understanding. “‘Givenness,’” Daneš writes, “depends on the length of the portion of preceding text in relation to which the evaluation is being carried out” and should be “empirically ascertained. . . . We may tentatively assume that these portions of ‘intervals’ are in a way correlated with the segmentation of text into paragraphs, groups of paragraphs, chapters, etc. [Daneš, 1974, p. 109].” That is, when a given–new cycle is completed, the writer encounters a choice point and, in order to continue appropriately, marks the introduction of the subsequent cycle of new information by indentation or some other appropriate device. “We may even expect a kind of hierarchy or stratification of the feature ‘given’: taking for granted that not only particular utterances but also the sections of text, as paragraphs, etc., and the whole text have ‘themes’ of their own (‘hyperthemes’), we can expect that, e.g., the theme of a chapter will be evaluated as ‘given’ throughout the chapter, so that the ‘interval of givenness’ in respect to the information carried by this ‘hypertheme’ will be the whole chapter [Daneš, 1974, p. 109-110].”

In other words, to the extent that an elaboration is substantial, it may well result in text which approaches the limits of the reader’s capacity for processing information. The inevitable result of such substantial elaboration therefore defines a choice point, which the skilled writer appropriately treats with a new text elaboration. For example, the writer starts a new

paragraph, section, or chapter. This corollary is important because it underscores the character of text segments (e.g., paragraphs) as text episodes, structured largely as they are because of the need of the writer to maintain the terms of the reciprocity principle.

Elaboration Type Corollary: Three basic elaboration types are available to writers. (a) Genre elaborations clarify the character of the communication and the text type. (b) Topical elaborations clarify discourse topics. (c) Local elaborations, or commentary, clarify discourse comments.

Many of these elaborations clarify concepts and terms—potential trouble-sources that otherwise might be unclear. That is, they “buttress” the text locally. In this category are definitions, examples, illustrations (including pictures, maps, diagrams, and other graphic material), parenthetical expressions, footnotes, restrictive and nonrestrictive clauses, appositives, glosses, and circumscriptions.

But writers buttress not just the text; writers also buttress the communicative event itself. Elaborations of this sort include genre-related characteristics, openings, logos and letterheads, titles, elements of tone (sort of title, level of formality, diction [e.g., the Victorian “we”], and typeface). These elaborations clarify just what sort of a text is underway and provide an interpretive context for the text itself. The net effect of these is to “frame” the text, to serve notice to the reader what sort of text it is and suggest how to read it.

Texts are specially elaborated at their starts in the form of titles, introductions, and explicit statement of discourse topic (e.g., thesis statement in expository prose and various metastatements). The purpose of these special elaborations is not so much to sustain reciprocity, however, as to initiate it. In beginning a text, the writer must take appropriate measures to make sure that the writer and reader start off on a common footing. Their frames of reference must be the same; it is from this mutual knowledge base, this common frame of reference that writers contextualize their expression and introduce the new information which follows.

Do the fundamental axiom and corollaries have relevance for **fictive texts** as well as informational texts? In reading fiction, the reader will normally be situated in terms of genre but often not immediately in terms of topic and comment. Stories often begin *in medias res*, for example, and, as a result, characters, places, and plots may well be introduced in a way that, while initially complicating the *who*, *what*, and *when* of *topic* and *comment*,

nonetheless—and largely because of such complicating—maintains reciprocity at the level of genre. Hence, one of the things that “There was no hope for him this time: it was the third stroke” confirms as we begin Joyce’s “The Sisters” is that this is a fictive type of text. The writer of fiction is not obligated, as is the writer of exposition, to restore reciprocity whenever and wherever it may be threatened; indeed, the novelist’s options include complicating the text at just those points the essayist might clarify. But this does not mean that reciprocity is irrelevant to fiction. What is unique about fiction is the temporary suspension and promise of reciprocity; in the end things will come together. Hence, when Melville begins *Moby Dick* by writing, “Call me Ishmael,” he does in fact enunciate that part of the text from which the narrator proceeds, but he does not allude to anything that is jointly known by both the writer and reader. And significantly, the reader does not object, thinking that Melville might have written ‘a better introduction to his book about whales.’ It is precisely by beginning in the middle of things and alluding to unknown characters and settings that novelists induce readers’ suspension of disbelief and engage readers in a particular kind of text and reading experience. That is to say, whereas the identity of “me” is unknown at the start of *Moby Dick*, it is precisely Melville’s treatment of new information as known that functions to make the world of the narrative plausible. Whereas the beginning of exposition situates the reader directly in terms of genre, topic, and comment, the beginning of literature situates readers to a kind of text that gains comparable clarity only as readers work their way through. No doubt the unique engagement of literature is largely due the suspended and protracted nature of the reciprocity or closure that the writer promises and the reader finally finds.