

# 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*  
Orlando, FL: Academic Press, 1986.  
234 pp. ISBN 0-12-523482-1.  
\$29.95 (£25.00)

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 the 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-

ducts a series of studies to attempt to show that texts better attuned to their readers (e.g., defining unknown terms and elaborating obscure points) are more comprehensible to their readers. As long as the concern is with communication, and that, admittedly, is part of the title of the book, the analysis and its resulting predictions hold up quite well. But when the topic becomes writing, the concern of the second part of the book, the reciprocity principle appears to be less and less relevant.

Nystrand reports three studies of writing, one of a child's early *Draw and Write* stories (with Himley); one on the beginnings of development of word spacing in a case of "emergent," that is, spontaneous or untaught literacy; and one of peer-writer conferences among university students. In the first, children did demonstrate the growing understanding of how texts function—that they must be of a certain length, that they should refer to the drawing, and that they should be coherent. The most interesting aspect of this development was, in my judgment, the shift from deictic to anaphoric reference in children's early writing (a fact also noted by Karmiloff-Smith). Early *Draw and Write* stories referred directly (deictically) to aspects of the drawing, for example, "I can make music." "The building is shaking." The child writes, referring to aspects of the picture. Later stories are anaphoric: "Butterflies are pretty. They have lots of designs." But this development has nothing to do with the reciprocity principle; if anything, it has to do with learning to create autonomous texts.

In the second study, an interesting account of the acquisition by a child of the principle that words are separated from one another by the interpolation of spaces, there was no hint that children come to insert spaces because of the reciprocity principle, the attempt to facilitate comprehension by the reader. Rather, the child appears to insert spaces because of seeing words in print. Again, principles other than the favored reciprocity principle seem to be involved.

The third study of writing provides an interesting analysis of student's discussions of the written texts of their peers, an instructional approach used at the University of Wisconsin for helping students improve their writing. Among the findings was the fact that students who engaged in these conferences tended to come to see the revising of their own texts as matters not merely of editing but of reconceptualizing. Control subjects did

the reverse. Second, it was found that if students read their papers orally, the comments were primarily directed to sentence-level concerns, whereas if they distributed written copy, they were much more likely to discuss higher level structures. These findings say something about writing as writing, namely, that written texts permit concerns for structure that speech does not and that revision involves reconceptualizing, not, as Nystrand had claimed earlier, elaborating. Nystrand's general claims about reciprocity are forced on these data.

The book is right in details but wrong in conception. It takes a principle that is basic to some uses of language and attempts to use it to explain all. Recipient design, the reciprocity principle, and the cooperative principle must be honored when the purpose is simply communication, the attempt to share an intention. But not all language has such a simple communicational intention, and writing in particular cannot be understood simply as a branch of rhetoric. Some interesting uses of writing involve not communication but representation. Consider, as a comparison, a painting. A painter may communicate with a viewer, but the artist does not negotiate a meaning with a viewer. The artist creates an artifact that stands in a tradition of such artifacts and, having created it, allows a viewer to interpret it in any way that the artifact permits. The artifact cannot be reduced to painter-viewer agreements.

To the extent that writing is attuned to the reader, it ceases to be a formal object and becomes simply a piece of persuasion. Rhetoric was, originally, an oral art. As an oral art, it had to honor the principles of recipient design carefully and directly. But written texts open a new horizon. Texts created with one intention can be read in a different time and place and by readers with different interests and intentions. The meanings created by readers may or may not coincide with those of the writers. Indeed, reading that goes beyond "authorial intention" is highly valued as critical reading. And writing that goes beyond simple communication becomes verbal art.

One college student in Nystrand's sample provides a case in point. Nystrand's claim was that students' progress as writers was "significantly related to how they viewed their readers" (p. 184). But here is what the subject actually said:

Personally, peer editing has been a success because it suspends any judgment regarding the essay. For example, there is no authority

figure in the group who is assigning grades. . . . This results in a more relaxed attitude towards my writing because I'm not wondering what grade I received on the paper. Rather I am able to concentrate on the piece itself. [It] helps the student see his paper more objectively . . . and relate to the very core of the essay itself. (italics added, p. 186)

In the student's view, the writing is improving not because it is becoming more attuned to the potential reader but because it is coming to be seen as an object in its own right. Authorial intentions can be directed to a text as an object just as well as to a potential reader.

Just what the relations among authorial intentions, texts, and reader interpretations are will no doubt continue to be central to the discussion of language and its uses in speech and writing and to the development of competencies with these forms in and out of schools. Nystrand attempts to handle these issues through a rhetorical theory invented for speech; the question is whether it takes us very far in our understanding of writing. ■

Text properties are objective,  
text meaning is not

In his review of my book, *The Structure of Written Communication* (CP, 1989, 34, pp. 119–120), Olson notes that “written texts have certain objective properties which are invariant across the intentions of the writer and the interpretations of the readers.” And, of course, they do. But this does not mean that the problem of their meaning has only one ultimate solution, that is, that their meaning is comparably objective. Any text has more objective properties than readers can or do use in interpreting their meaning, and ultimately any interpretation requires readers to treat some of these objective properties as more salient than others. Hence, whereas properties are objective, interpretations are not.

To demonstrate his point here, Olson would need to establish text meaning independently of the text itself and show a cause-and-effect relationship between objective properties of text and the resulting meaning; for example, he would need to write a computer algorithm that would derive text meaning from an analysis of text features. As Stanley Fish (1980) argued—and I agree with him for the most part—our own purposes as readers largely determine the saliency of various text properties and hence the text’s meaning; it is not the other way around.

Nor is this problem addressed by arguing that experienced readers routinely distinguish writer intentions from text meaning. The relationship between writer intention and text meaning varies according to genre. For example, whereas writer intention and text meaning are more or less fully aligned in exposition, they diverge radically in irony (e.g., Jonathan Swift’s “A Modest Proposal”). Furthermore, the relationship between writer intention and text meaning for any given text is *not specified in the text itself*. Hence, the important thing about expository prose is not that the writer’s meaning is clear because it is fully represented and “decontextualized” in “autonomous texts,” but rather

that indexical features of the genre exposition (including tone, organization, indigenous patterns of organization, certain sorts of titles) prompt the reader to interpret what is said as indeed what is meant.

Where Fish is wrong, I think, is in his idea that because of the power of readers’ interpretive strategies, any text can mean virtually anything. He’s wrong about this, not just because of objective properties of text, but also because of the reciprocity that binds writers and readers in the common work of text meaning. That is, because readers and writers work largely in terms of the intentions and purposes of each other, readers are constrained by their sense of the writers’ intentions.

In my Chapter 7 on the development of orthography and spacing in the texts of preschooler Paul Bissex, I argue that words “emerge” in these texts only when Paul learns to synchronize what he has to say in terms of readers’ expectations. Hence, when he segments his texts in appropriately “writerly” ways, and when readers read them in appropriately “readerly” ways—with full reciprocity in their respective roles—the texts function and the readers can read them. Nowhere do I or Bissex offer any data that I am aware of—and I am aware of none—that suggest what Olson concludes, namely, that Paul inserts spaces because he sees them in print. There is no evidence that this is the case.

Olson notes my finding that students who engage in conferences do more reconceptualizing than control subjects, who do more editing, and he suggests, if I read him correctly, that this finding says something about a critical difference between oral and written language, namely, that “written texts permit concerns for structure that speech does not.” But, clearly, if the key difference between my experimental and control groups here is *oral conferencing* about written text, Olson’s conclusion doesn’t follow because it was the group that *talked* about texts that did the reconceptualizing.

I, for one, do not attribute differences in reconceptualizing versus editing to the oral language of conferencing, but rather to the difference in audience that peer conferencing entails, namely, less teacher-as-examiner and more reader-as-collaborator, to use the Britton et al. (1975) terms. Hence, when Olson concludes that the student I quote on page 185 benefits not because her writing is becoming more attuned to a potential reader but rather “because [her text] is coming to be seen as an object in its own

right,” I respond by saying: Yes, she is coming to see her texts in this way, but not just because she is dealing with written text; after all, the control subjects were dealing with written texts too. More important than dealing with written text is the fact that she perceives her peers as a less intimidating audience to write for than the one she has come to expect of teachers.

#### References

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#### It is written

What does a text mean? Anything, as long as the reader and writer can agree on it. It’s a curious theory, held in medieval times by mystics such as Paracelsus and Agricola and in recent times by Fish and Bleich—and now by Nystrand (CP, 1989, 34, pp. 119–120). Because the reader invents the meaning, the reader can read anything in anything, including:

Sermons in stone  
Books in babbling brooks  
And good in everything.

(*As You Like It*, II, i)

My innocent claim was that there is sufficient internal structure in a written text for a writer to compare what the writer means with what the text means. A mismatch could lead to revision in the case of writing or to rereading in the case of interpreting. In that sense, text meaning is autonomous. Nystrand offers as an alternative the view that as long as reader and writer agree, a wink is as good as a nod.

Nystrand again argues that children invent spacing between words to help their readers rather than begin to insert spaces because they see them in print. Why then did spacing between words appear in manuscripts only between the 10th and 12th centuries A.D.? And why do Vai and Cree scripts not have spaces? Sheer disregard for the readers?

As to what writers are learning in their conferences, I must remind Nystrand of his written text. On page 188 it says the following: “The groups that worked . . . collectively examined written texts rather than merely listened to oral reading [of

their texts] by authors. This led to deeper level revision." He, using his habit of reading as invention, sees this as not a by-product of the availability of a visible written record but as a product of reduced intimidation.

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#### **How texts mean**

My theory of reciprocity deals not with determining the particular meaning of any given text but, rather, with describing the phenomenon of its meaning, that is, explaining how it comes to have the meaning that it does. Readers do not unilaterally invent meaning, and no text simply means; as with any cultural event, text meaning is a unique configuration of the purposes of both the writer and the reader.

Although reciprocity between writers and readers is a universal requirement for written discourse, spacing between words is not. Spacing between words is merely a convention that maintains reciprocity between writers and readers in English and, of course, most written languages.

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