

THE ROLE OF CONTEXT IN WRITTEN COMMUNICATION

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Introduction: The Doctrine of Autonomous Texts

A substantial body of thought about language supports the notion that written and spoken language differ most with respect to the contexts in which each is created and must function. Writers, unlike speakers, do not produce language in the company of a language receiver. And written texts, unlike spoken, must function apart from the context of their production. Unlike spoken discourse, which is said to be 'context bound,' written texts must be 'autonomous' and 'explicit' in order to function 'acontextually.' Indeed, current research distinguishes composition from writing a priori in precisely these terms. Bereiter and Scardamalia's distinction is typical:

Writing is use of the written medium and entails such skills as handwriting, spelling, and punctuation. People who could converse by passing notes back and forth to one another would be said to know how to write. If that were all they could do, however, they could not be said to know how to compose. . . . [Composition] involves producing . . . "autonomous text" . . . , a coherent piece of language that can accomplish its rhetorical purpose without depending on context or on interaction between sender and receiver. One does not, in principle, need to know how to write in order to compose. Composing can be done by dictation (pp. 3-4).

This contrast between 'context-bound utterance and 'autonomous' text is often defined in terms of **exophoric** and **endophoric** referencing. Exophoric references 'point away from' the text either to things in the speaking environment (e.g., *Put it here*) or to ideas which exist as presumed, shared knowledge and require no elaboration (e.g., *I don't believe it*). By contrast, endophoric references point to other parts of the text where they are elaborated, illustrated, or defined. Consider the following example:

(1) What we really need in our field is articulation of a comprehensive theory. This effort is complicated by the fact that so many researchers operate out of different and frequently incompatible assumptions.

In these two sentences, This effort is an endophoric reference to something identified in the text itself, namely articulation of a comprehensive theory in the previous sentence. Endophoric [End page]

referencing is the chief way writers and speakers explain what they mean; and when editors and teachers ask a writer to be 'clear' and 'explicit,' they are typically requesting a more endophoric and less exophoric text.

Three Fallacies

It is true that written texts typically function in contexts other than those in which they were written. It does not follow from this premise, however, that in order to function, written texts must be 'autonomous,' 'acontextual,' and explicit. Nor does it follow that those which are abbreviated, ¹e.g., notes, are uncomposed. There are three fallacies in such deductions. The first fallacy is confusing situation of expression with context of use. The fact that writers do not 'converse' with readers face to face or that their texts speak independently of them does not mean that these texts are therefore 'acontextual' or 'autonomous.' Rather, it means that unlike speech, where situation of expression and context of use are concurrent, written texts are composed for a context of eventual use.

The second fallacy is confusing fullness of meaning with explicitness of text. Although it is true that difficult texts often benefit from revisions which clarify key points by elaborating them, it does not follow that texts become categorically more meaningful as more of their references are elaborated. This is why legal documents do not necessarily mean the more for all their explicitness and why EXIT signs and grocery lists do not necessarily mean the less for all their crypticness. Moreover, the kind of effective elaboration which enhances, say, well-written technical manuals with ample explanations, illustrations, and definitions is neither random nor ubiquitous. Rather, it is planned and selective, dealing only with points re emphasis or clarification.

There is a subtle and important difference between an **elaboration** and a **complication of text**. For example, a particular part in the tax code that might be ambiguous and consequently difficult for tax attorneys may well be abstruse and hard in a very different way for the general tax payer. That a given text can be ambiguous for some readers and abstruse for others can be demonstrated by showing that high- and low-knowledge readers require qualitatively different revisions (Nystrand, in preparation): tax attorneys require more details—elaborations of key points—whereas tax payers need the main idea to relate all the details. The same endophoric text which works to clarify things for the attorneys works just the opposite to complicate things for the general tax payer.

A well-written text communicates not because it says everything all by itself but rather because it strikes a careful balance between what needs to be said and what may be assumed. Clearly, what counts in effective composition is knowing how and when to be explicit, not simply being explicit. [*End page*]

The third fallacy is distinguishing written and spoken language in terms of autonomy of text. The doctrine of autonomous texts juxtaposes not spoken and written language but rather certain highly specialized uses of language, namely literary composition and idle chatter. It is a skewed comparison, overlooking such examples of spoken language as lectures, seminar discussions, and college rap sessions; and such examples of writing as kit instructions and notes.² Cohesion results not when language is written but rather when language—both written and spoken—is put to particular uses, especially those uses which bridge discrepancies in writer-reader knowledge, as in expert-layman communication (Nystrand, Doyle, and Himley, in preparation). Language is not composed because it is internally cohesive; language takes particular forms when it is put to particular uses. To characterize written composition in terms of text structure is to put the structural cart before the functional horse.

Not only is the doctrine of the autonomous text specious. By excluding a priori important examples of written communication, this doctrine has fostered a number of misconceptions about the composing process, especially among educators. First, it has perpetrated the idea that certain uses of written language (viz. essays) not only can but ought to function rhetorically without any relationship to their context of use. As a corollary to this point, it has justified teaching writing as a matter of correct form rather than effective use. It has furthermore perpetrated the idea that there are some uses of written language (e.g., notes) that are a compositional. And it has promoted a categorical explicitness of text as an inappropriate instructional objective.³

In order to examine the many problems with these sundry contentions, let's first consider the composition of notes.

How Notes Are Composed

Notes and signs are typically informational (e.g., EXIT or 'Gone to store—be home for dinner'); and their composition requires keeping in mind a number of critical informational variables having to do with who, what, when, where, and how: who the readers will be and what they will know at the time they discover the text; when the readers will read and, in the case of signs, how much time they will have to read; and where the readers are most likely to find the information (notes), or where the readers are most likely to be when they discover the information (signs). These situational variables are critical to text meaning, defining a window of semantic opportunity as it were: EXIT signs have no meaning except in relation to doors, and notes which are addressed to the person who delivers the milk must be placed next to empty bottles, etc. Children's notes are often amusing and uncommunicative because of their failure to take these factors into account (e.g., 'Mom, I'll be home in a few minutes').⁴ [End page]

If composition is a deliberate process of organizing language and thoughts in order to achieve a particular purpose or effect, then writing notes clearly qualifies. It certainly involves far more than 'the mere basic skills' of handwriting, spelling, and punctuation. Composing notes requires the writer to make a great number of correct assumptions about context. Notes are no less composed simply because they are abbreviated. As with all composition, the writer must carefully balance what is said, i.e., the text, against what need not be said. And what need not be said, of course, depends on the actual context of use, i.e., who's reading, what they know, when they read it, what they want to find out, and so on.

How Essays Communicate⁵

If notes are no less composed because they are cryptic and contextualised, essays are no more composed and 'autonomous' because they are elaborately explicit. The composition of an essay is as much constrained by its context of eventual use as is the briefest grocery list. A good example of this point is Canadian psychologist David Olson's 'From Utterance to Text: The Bias of Language in Speech and Writing,' the seminal essay which argues the case for autonomous texts and is typically cited as the source of the doctrine. This essay was written for a very particular context of use, namely the forum of *The Harvard Educational Review*, a research journal for scholars with multidisciplinary interests in educational issues. So that the essay might function in this context of scholarly dialog, argument, and reference, it is paginated; it is prefaced by an abstract; it is replete with footnotes, reference notes, and references; and it is appropriately formatted in such a way that the author's name and the title of the journal, along with volume, number, and date, appear on the title page of the essay. The publisher has made sure that these essential contextual factors accompany all future photocopies of the text.⁶

The author himself, moreover, contextualises his argument by starting with an extensive literature review, reciting not only historical but also contemporary evidence from research in the structure of language, the nature of comprehension, the nature of logical reasoning, the acquisition of language, and the psychology of reading. The argumentative purpose of this review is obvious: The author hopes to show compelling reasons for his thesis. The communicative function is different, however: The review serves to establish footing⁷—shared knowledge or common ground with readers from which the author sallies forth with his main points. In this sense, the review functions like the question that begins a conversation, 'You know that box I always talking about? Well, . . .'. or the 're:' of business correspondence, or, indeed, the effective introduction to any essay: It works thematically by establishing a communicative footing and so initiating the communication.
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The Structure of Argument vs. The Structure of Communication

It is generally true that essayists proceed, as Olson notes, by explicating the many implications entailed by their premises in the manner of Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, and that, for this reason, essays tend to be highly explicit. Yet if essays are more explicit than grocery lists, this explicitness is due to more than requirements of genre to state propositions. Reasoning by inference, deduction, demonstrations, and proof—particularly on topics new to readers—make special demands on language, as well as on logical processes. These two kinds of demands require careful distinction if we are to understand what essayists do qua thinker compared to what essayists do qua writer.

It is the essayist qua thinker whom we 'charge with reasoning via unspecified inference and assumption' 'if unconventionalized or nonlinguistic knowledge is permitted to intrude' into the argument (Olson, 1977, p. 272). But it is the essayist qua writer whom we charge with incomprehensibility if complex new ideas and terms are inadequately contextualised in terms of shared, nonlinguistic knowledge. Indeed, any text which might succeed in eliminating all dependence on presupposed, world knowledge would be a very ambiguous and nonexplicit text—as unclear as any image which is all figure and no ground. The essayist qua thinker formulates 'a small set of connected statements of great generality that may occur as topic sentences or paragraphs or as premises of extended scientific or philosophical treatise' (Olson, 1977, p. 269). By contrast, the essayist qua writer makes appropriate text segmentations, this 'indentation functioning, as does all punctuation, as a gloss upon the overall literary process underway at that point' (Rodgers, 1966, p. 6). Endophoric referencing is important in terms of exposition because it is the way essayists spell out the implications entailed in their premises. Endophoric referencing is important in terms of communication because it is the major way writers contextualise new information and so maintain a balance of understanding between themselves and their readers.

In short, effective text analysis requires careful distinction between the **structure of argument** and the **structure of communication**. As argument, Olson's essay works by stating explicit points and propositions. As communication, however, it works by juxtaposing these propositions with knowledge readers bring to the text. This reader knowledge is unstated, shared, given, and not necessarily propositional. Hence, as important as the many explicit points that Olson makes are the many that are never stated. And this omission is surely no sin. To the contrary: Olson's thesis is clear because he strikes an effective balance between what needs to be said and what may remain unsaid. Were he elaborate in his treatment of the latter, his essay would be turgid, wordy, unclear; and we might rightly hold him in violation of the 'contract' that underlies all communication from the briefest note to the longest treatise. [*End page*]

The contract which writers have with their readers requires them to attend to three different kinds of compositional tasks. First, they must establish footing by identifying common ground, as noted above. In addition, they must contextualise new information—'buttressing' those points of text which, if not treated, would threaten the established balance of discourse and shared knowledge and finally (though not necessarily last), they must carefully mark relevant text boundaries to indicate conceptual, narrative, and other shifts, and to break the text into manageable information units.

Olson's essay is clearly not just an autonomous text explicating all the implications entailed by his general premise. We understand Olson's thesis largely as we do (a) because it appears in the context of a research journal and (b) because the argument concerns an idea which has a history (dating back at least to Plato), and which has been researched by scholars in many diverse fields of inquiry. The text of Olson's essay, like all well written compositions, functions not because it is independent of its context of use but because it is so carefully attuned to this context.

The Role of Context in Written Communication

What, then, is the role of context in written communication? To begin, context of use in written communication is eventual, not concurrent with the production of discourse as with spoken language. For the most part, the writer's situation is irrelevant to actual text functioning. Where the writer composes, what might be viewed from the writer's window during the composing process, what music might have provided inspiration—all these aspects of the composer's situation while writing are functionally unimportant. Pieces of writing do not function communicatively at the time of their creation; they only bear a potential for communication. It is precisely the purpose of the writing process to create such a potential. This potential is realised, moreover, only when writer and reader finally come together by way of the text. It is this situation of the reader reading which defines context of use in written communication, for it is this moment precisely when the writer finally speaks to the reader and the text must do its communicative thing.

As we have seen, this point has been a source of considerable confusion in many comparisons of spoken and written language. Olson and others, for example, define context narrowly in terms of immediate context of production—mainly such paralinguistic features as gestures and quizzical looks. The actual context of situation for any communication, however, is far more rich and complex than the physical gestures of the conversants. Relevant factors include the nature of the audience, the medium, and the purpose of the communication. This is no less true for writing than for speaking. Business executives, for example, know all too well that the complete meaning of an interoffice
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memorandum frequently involves not just the typed text but myriad contextual details, including (a) why the communication is in writing; (b) who is copied (and has received carbon copies or cc:); (c) who is not copied; and especially (d) who, though not copied, is nonetheless a recipient (of the 'blind' carbon copy or bcc:) and perhaps even the main reason for the memo.

It is true, of course, that written texts must function without benefit of hand gesture or eye contact. But it is a serious mistake to view the paralinguistics of speech as a categorical prerequisite to all communication. If **paralinguistics** refers to those phenomena that 'occur alongside spoken language, interact with it, and produce together with it a total system of communication' (Abercrombie, 1968, p. 55), then written language may be said to have its own special resources in this regard. These resources, moreover, serve the essential paralinguistic purposes of **modulation** (superimposing upon a text a particular attitudinal colouring) and **punctuation** (marking boundaries at the beginning and end of a text and at various points within to emphasise particular expressions, and to segment the utterance into manageable information units 1977, p. 65). Quotation marks, for example, commonly indicate irony, skepticism, or critical detachment; and exclamation marks and underlining typically show emphasis. A more complex type of modulation is achieved when writers exploit reader expectations for particular genres of written discourse. The classic example here is irony in Swift's 'A Modest Proposal.' Because it is written as an essay, readers often assume the proposal is serious, and the contents are meant to be taken literally.⁸

The increasing availability and sophistication of electronic word processors substantially increases the range of such paralinguistic modulation available to professional business, and academic writers. With capabilities previously available only in printers' shops, these machines are now on many individual writers' desks. Included among these capabilities are the usual marks of punctuation, plus boldface, italics, hanging indents, offsets, and fonts of all sorts. The total impact of these typographic capabilities in this new setting is not yet clear, especially on writing tasks not usually published. For example, what sorts of correspondence and typescripts should and should not be formatted with justified right margins? Nonetheless, the possibilities of these systems for subtle modulations of text have not been lost on the office systems people, who routinely promote their products not only in terms of increased efficiency but also, and especially, enhanced corporate image. With only a few formatting commands, businesses can present themselves as Baskerville, Palatino, Sanserif, or Bold Roman. No doubt the day of the designer letter is upon us.

In addition to such possibilities for modulation, writers have access to a wide range of punctuation for marking syntactic, prosodic, and semantic boundaries. The most significant mark of punctuation for use beyond the sentence [*End page*]

is indentation and paragraphing. The paragraph (from Gk. *para*, beside + *graphos*, mark) was originally a symbol placed in the margin to indicate conceptual, narrative, and other shifts in the flow of discourse. The original notion persists in our transitive verb *to paragraph* (Rodgers, 1966). This treatment of paragraphing has recently been elaborated by Halliday and Hasan (1976), who see the paragraph as a 'device introduced into the written language to suggest . . . periodicity':

In principle, we shall expect to find a greater degree of cohesion within a paragraph than between paragraphs; and in a great deal of written English this is exactly what we do find. In other writing, however, and perhaps as a characteristic of certain authors, the rhythm is contrapuntal: The writer extends a dense cluster of cohesive ties across the paragraph boundary and leaves a texture within the paragraph relatively loose. And this itself is an instance of a process that is very characteristic of language altogether, a process in which two associated variables come to be dissociated from each other with a very definite semantic and rhetorical effect. Here the two variables in question are the paragraph structure and the cohesive structure (pp. 296-297).

This approach to paragraphing has recently been operationalised by Bell Labs in its Writer's Workbench program, a collection of computer programs designed to aid writers in evaluating and modifying their texts (cf. Gingrich, 1980).

Conclusion

It is clearly a mistake to associate the spontaneity of casual talk with fragmented expression, and equally wrong to confuse elaborateness of text with fullness of meaning. The attempt to view writers as somehow disadvantaged because they are bereft of the paralinguistic resources of speech, moreover, is a misconception of written communication, and is consistent with the traditional conception of writing as a defective representation of speech. What is missed by such confusions is how writing and speech work differently as language systems. If casual conversation with friends as well as notes to oneself are cryptic whereas formal inquiries to and from the Internal Revenue Service—either written or spoken—are comparably elaborate and explicit, this difference mainly means that the former can be more abbreviated while the latter must be more elaborated if coherence is to be maintained, messages are to be adequate, and communication assured. It does not mean that cryptic texts are necessarily 'semantically inadequate' or unclear to the reader/hearer. And above all, it most definitely does not mean that written texts are 'autonomous' whereas spoken utterances are 'context-bound.' What it mainly means is that speech and writing work differently to maintain reciprocity and the underlying pact of discourse between conversants.

Notes

1. The impression that speech is 'fragmented' and writing is 'compact' and 'integrated' (e.g., Chafe, 1982) may be phenomenological. In speech, planning process and generated text are largely simultaneous and inseparable whereas in writing, they always separate as soon as composing is complete. As public behaviour, speech presents itself not only as words spoken but also as a sequence of starts and restarts and pauses. By contrast, writing, which is private behaviour, conceals hesitations and restarts, and presents itself only as the tidied up result, altogether detached from the process. Until recently, pauses in the writing process have not even drawn research interest (cf. Matsuhashi, 1982). Also, it is important to recognise the bias of written language in the analysis of language, both written and spoken. Because both analyses are conducted via the written medium (actual written texts in the case of writing and written transcripts in the case of speech), the analyst typically enters the analysis as a reader. It should surprise no one that written texts seem 'integrated' by comparison with written transcripts which seem 'fragmented': speech is indeed fragmented by the very process of transcription, a process which written texts never undergo.
2. Three important exceptions to this generalization are Stubbs (1982), Tannen (1982), and Wells (1981).
3. Two studies which show the extent to which the doctrine of autonomous texts is a pedagogical notion rather than a linguistic or rhetorical concept are Michaels (1981) and Williams (1980).
4. See Gundlach (1982).
5. For an extended discussion of this section, see Nystrand, Doyle, & Himley (in preparation).
6. As more books are photocopied, alas, more publishers are printing the year of publication on the title page (rather than on the copyright page).
7. Communicative footing is not to be confused with Goffman's (1979) footing: the speaker's stance toward the audience in face-to-face interaction.
8. Steinmann (1981) has written extensively on poetic effect in these terms.

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