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## Bridging epistemologies and methodologies: research in written language function

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# Introduction

## 1 Bridging epistemologies and methodologies: research in written language function

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This book is about written language functions and about written language research. The essays here are united in their investigation of language as social action—an approach to textual study that crosses traditional boundaries of discipline and method to uncover what written language is, how it works, how it affects readers, and what it demands of authors.

The functional approaches to written text presented here are most closely related to the work of scholars from the so-called London School of Linguistics as reinterpreted in the systemic linguistics of Michael Halliday and his followers. The London School challenged investigations of language in isolation, claiming that our understanding of meaning in text is dependent on the ‘context of situation,’ a concept promulgated by Malinowski ([1923] 1949) and meaning the immediate textual and extra-textual context in which an utterance is performed. This concept was later expanded by both Malinowski (1935) and Firth ([1935] 1957) to refer to the entire cultural environment encompassing a communication event.

Both Firth and Malinowski believed that meaning in language arises primarily out of speakers’ and listeners’ recognition of conventional social situations which are associated with linguistic choice. Halliday agrees with this central premise but also asserts that language itself is as central to meaning as the social activity it reflects. It allows us to achieve a wide variety of meaning potential within a given context: ‘Language not only serves to facilitate and support other modes of social action that constitute its environment, but also actively creates an environment of its own, so making possible all the imaginative modes of meaning, from backyard gossip to narrative fiction and epic poetry.’ In short, while language is configured in part by the social action it supports, it can also create a social context within which it means: ‘As we learn how to mean, we learn to predict each [language and context] from the other’ (Halliday 1978: 3). Halliday conflates textual and contextual meaning, defining language as SOCIAL SEMIOTIC.

This view of language as social semiotic has dramatic consequences for scholarly investigation of written discourse. If we accept it, then we must

break down barriers within traditional investigatory fields that limit our examination of language.

First, we must reconsider what territory should be covered in an adequate language theory; a scholar who explains language as lexical and syntactic components reduced to a formal linguistic system, yet ignores SEMIOTIC systems of meaning that exist outside the text, has presented a deficient perspective; the fact that the nature of contextual meaning has been the purview of psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists, and literary aestheticians (who have adopted perspectives from the social sciences) does not justify a narrow view. An explanation of textual function must account for the semiotic systems that language creates and the extratextual meanings referenced by language.

Second, we must insist upon PRAGMATIC evidence for theoretical claims about language, that is, upon text at work in actual communication situations rather than text composed specifically to illustrate a theoretical point. A theory that explains texts produced in isolation, but does not account for texts produced in real-world contexts, denies that language and context together contribute to meaning potential (see Jordan in this volume).

Finally, we must seek HEURISTIC universals in explaining textual function (see Couture, Chapter 4 in this volume). If language is social semiotic, then interpersonal activity is the enabling force empowering the interface between language and context. Structural descriptions that describe textual function, but have no heuristic value—that is, no potential to show how language users generate and interpret texts in varying social situations—repudiate that interface. An adequate functional theory of language must unite speakers, listeners, and situations, and seek the sources of sociosemantic congruence.

Given the methodological imperatives suggested by an exploration of language as social action, it is not surprising that scholarship in the functions of written language has traversed what heretofore have been separate domains in the study of language: the fields of literature, linguistics, and composition.<sup>1</sup> The epistemological and methodological boundaries often assumed for each field, schematically represented in Table A, have not provided sufficient

Table A Epistemological and methodological aims of studies in literature, linguistics, and composition

Disciplinary area	Investigative thrust	Method	Epistemological domain	Questions to be answered
Literature	Theory	Explanation	Semiotics	What is this phenomenon? How does it work?
Linguistics	Research	Proof	Pragmatics	What does it do?
Composition	Pedagogy	Application	Heuristics	What does it require?

explanation in investigations of written language function. I say 'often assumed' because publishers and academic departments continue to categorize textual studies as representing one or another of these fields; unfortunately, such pigeon-holing disguises the multifunctional aims of this research to unite semiotic, pragmatic, and heuristic approaches to textual analysis.

The 'hybrid' scholarship in written language function, of course, does not as a body reflect only the work of Halliday. Nor does it necessarily make overt reference to language as social semiotic or reflect entirely a shift in the bases of knowledge regarded as central to each field of language study.

The aims of literary study have shifted from an elitist interest in aesthetic appreciation of poetic text to an egalitarian emphasis on the importance of reading communities to the assessment of textual value in both literary and ordinary language (see Miller 1979). But, interestingly, this scholarly shift parallels a similar change in the educational interests of college and university students: more and more students are coming to post-secondary education eager to learn 'practical' skills that they can apply immediately in the workplace. Reader-response approaches to textual analysis have practical value in higher education. A literary theory that is also a discourse theory, validated in the interpretation of actual texts in a variety of contexts, has heuristic potential for the production and interpretation of future texts: it becomes a tool with real-world application.

The criticism of Michel Foucault fits this new paradigm. Consider, for example, his exploration of authorship that explains the significance of authorial presence for textual interpretation. Foucault claims that a text's author-function can 'reveal the manner in which discourse is articulated on the bases of social relationships' (1977: 137). Authorship, in effect, is what distinguishes a text's influence upon the knowledge base of a field: 'A study of Galileo's works could alter our knowledge of the history, but not the science, of mechanics; whereas, a reexamination of the books of Freud or Marx can transform our understanding of psychoanalysis or Marxism' (1977: 135-6). Not only does Foucault assert the contextual contribution of authorship to textual meaning; he also asserts the need for this theory to be tested in texts and contexts other than those he cites:

Unfortunately, there is a decided absence of positive propositions in this essay, as it applies to analytic procedures or directions for future research, but I ought at least to give the reasons why I attach such importance to a continuation of this work. Developing a similar analysis could provide the bases for a typology of discourse. . . . [1977: 136-7]

He further predicts his theory's heuristic potential to explain textual function and defines new criteria for critical theory, criteria which demand that theory both explain what text expresses and account for how it is produced, valued, and transmitted:

This form of investigation might also permit the introduction of an historical analysis of discourse. Perhaps the time has come to study not only the expressive value and formal transformations of discourse, but its mode of existence: the modifications and variations, within any culture of modes of circulation, valorization, attribution, and appropriation. [1977: 137]

His own attempt to explain the author-function is as expansive as the above criteria suggest: Foucault moves from a consideration of authorial presence in literary language, to the interpretive language of psychoanalysis, to the referential language of science, to the appropriated language of business—clearly, the critical domain is no longer solely language as art.

In linguistics, scholars' renewed efforts to describe the functions of actual language have been promoted by economic benefit as well as academic interest. To be sure, a sincere attempt to recover from the narrow emphases on formal structure reflected in Chomsky's transformational grammar governs systemic linguists' exploration of actual language use (see Jordan in this volume). But funding lies in another direction now as well. Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) has become big business, a practical problem with considerable economic consequences. The focus of TESL instruction must be upon the functions of language within a context rather than upon a study of language structure in isolation. TESL scholarship has led both to development of sociosemantic theories of language function and to tests of that theory as it explains differences in textual meaning potential and heuristic utility for language teaching (see, for example, the research reported in Selinker *et al.* 1981).

A focus on semiotic theory, pragmatic research, and heuristics for language teaching is evident in the work of several linguists. For example, Fawcett (1980) has developed a complex theory of language as it reflects both the social and psychological semiotic; Jakobson (1960) has shown the potential of a functional analysis of language to reveal the pragmatic differences between poetic and ordinary language; and Pike (1964) has shown the heuristic value of tagmemic theory to help students generate effective expository composition. But the merger of these three approaches to analysis of text function is most fully met in the work of Michael Halliday.

Halliday's proposed grammar of English satisfies his own stringent requirement for representing meaning potential both within language and outside the text. The roots of his functional grammar are not in the formal components of lexis and syntax but rather in semantics. Halliday identifies three kinds of meaning generated in any language event: ideational meaning that reflects reportorial logic and representation of experience; interpersonal meaning that reflects social relationships between discourse participants; and textual meaning that allows discourse participants to recognize a stretch of language as meaningful text (see Bernhardt and Brandt in this volume). Halliday systematically relates his semantic scheme to meaning systems within language and to the larger social context. His functional grammar explains how multifunctional meanings are generated in a communication event; it shows how those meanings are realized in the formal syntactic and lexical components of language's grammatical system; and it explains how linguistic features reflect choices from a 'higher-level semiotic,' systems of meaning above language, such as those designating textual genre (1977: 193). Naturally, his grammar is complex (see Halliday 1985), as it must be to explain the complexity of actual communication, but it also stands up to empirical test.

Halliday has applied his theory of language function to the analysis of literary style, illustrating, for instance, how an analytic review of clausal structure in terms of 'its process, participants, and circumstances' can reveal systematic features that correlate with our interpretation of how a literary passage represents real-world experience. Certain features in a literary work are 'brought into relief' through 'the whole of the writer's creative use of "meaning potential"; . . . the nature of language is such that [authors] can convey, in a line of print, a complex of simultaneous themes, reflecting the variety of functions that language is required to serve' (1971: 352, 360).<sup>2</sup> In short, he has identified the sources of textual ambiguity and explained them as purposeful and systematic.

Halliday has also extended his work in the functions of language to the practical problems of language teaching. While convinced of the virtues of studying language for its own sake, he has 'no objection' to the view that 'an academic subject should be judged by its results.' The relationship between theory and application is complementary, each having the potential to advance the other: 'Application . . . contributes to theory; but if the range of application is not to remain static the "pure" research must go on' (Halliday *et al.* 1964: 7). Beyond citing the creative interplay of linguistic theory and application, Halliday sees the application of theory as a responsible outcome of the language scholar's interest in educational processes:

My interest in linguistic questions is ultimately an 'applied' one, a concern with language in relation to the process and experience of education. . . . The sociolinguistic patterns of the community, the language of family, neighbourhood and school, and the personal experience of language from earliest infancy are among the most fundamental elements in a child's environment for learning. [1978: 5]

Throughout his work in theory, research, and teaching, Halliday has responded to the full semiotic complexity of textual communication, meeting the challenge of explaining actual language and asserting the contribution of linguistic theory to everyday social concourse.

Finally, researchers in English composition, with their practical focus upon improving writing instruction, have made new discoveries about the nature of the composing process that delineate the relationships between the contexts for writing and the effectiveness of texts. Research here has paralleled literary critics' interest in interpretive communities as well as systemic linguists' interests in the functions of textual features. Recently, fruitful research in the contexts for writing has been conducted in the workplace, a response to societal demand for skilled writers who can produce documents that will function in organizational contexts (see, for instance, Couture and Goldstein 1985; and Brown and Herndl in this volume).

The effort to move compositional studies from narrow work in the teaching of expository writing to expansive research in written language and discourse theory received its greatest impetus in 1977 with the publication of Mina Shaughnessy's *Errors and Expectations*. In this exceptional book, Shaughnessy validates the classroom as a place for serious research into the functions of written language. Through the meticulous study of error in student writing,

she derived a systematic method for teaching that addresses dysfunction in expository composition and explains the linguistic causes of that dysfunction. Shaughnessy reveals how problematic linguistic choice is influenced by contexts for writing, that is, by the experience of the student writer in educational settings. At the same time, she proposes systematic solutions for problems in student writing. For example, she describes the problems student writers have with syntax as symptomatic both of their inexperience with the written mode and of their rational, though inept, response to conflicting demands: in writing, they are expected to express thought with fluency, as in speech, and also to consolidate ideas with the formal markers of hierarchical relations anticipated by readers. It is not surprising, given these opposite constraints, that student writing often becomes 'derailed,' as Shaughnessy puts it; that is, it takes off in an unexpected direction as the writer attacks simultaneously the task of pushing prose forward and relating its parts. Writing instructors who must address this problem will be more successful, Shaughnessy asserts, if they help students 'develop the verbal responsiveness to [their] own thoughts and to the demands of [their readers] that produces genuinely mature syntax' (1977: 89). Shaughnessy, like Halliday, viewed the study of language behavior as a social and personal responsibility—her humane concern is reflected in the conclusions she derived from her own work: Basic Writing 'students write the way they do, not because they are slow or non-verbal, indifferent to or incapable of academic excellence, but because they are beginners and must, like all beginners, learn by making mistakes' (1977: 5). We can hope to solve writing problems in school, in business, and in government through the studied observation of communication in actual contexts if we design research with the aim of resolving the communication dilemmas of those whom language serves.

Shaughnessy's work has inspired an attitude toward composition that is reflected in the best composition research today: writing research should view the communication problems of writers as research questions whose answers lie in the processes and products of writing and hold promise of explaining the varied ways we can mean in written discourse. This legacy of research and theory emerging from practice has continued in studies of writing and writers throughout the English-speaking world, not only in academic contexts but in business, industry, and government settings as well. Research like Odell, Goswami, and Herrington's investigations of context and style in business documents (see, for example, 1983), Faigley and Witte's studies of revision and textual cohesion (see, for example, Faigley and Witte 1981; and Witte and Faigley 1981) and Christie's and Martin and Rothery's patient analyses of the functions of children's writing (see, for example, Christie *et al.* 1984; and Christie and Martin and Rothery in this volume) emerges from the pressing need to solve the problems of communicating in today's world. It is rooted in a theory of language as it has meaning in context and is validated in the description of actual language use.

The trend toward merging the disciplinary foci of literature, linguistics, and composition will encourage a more comprehensive and powerful approach to textual analyses—one that explains language and how it works, shows

evidence of what it does, and applies to the compositional and interpretive tasks that it requires of writers and readers.

The essays in this book represent this forward direction in written language investigation. They are loosely arranged as they address each of the formal questions that have characterized the studies in linguistic semiotics, pragmatics, and heuristics displayed in Table A. As readers will see, each essay is actually multifunctional in its approach, treating simultaneously issues of theory, research, and practice.

The essays in Part I offer functional descriptions of specific linguistic features in different varieties of written text. Each also proposes a method of textual analysis that may lead to a more comprehensive theory of written language function. In an ethnographic study of the composing behavior of writers in corporate settings, Robert L. Brown, Jr. and Carl G. Herndl attempt to explain two 'puzzling' linguistic features in business communications: writers' persistent use of 'superfluous nominalizations' and of 'narrative structure,' despite their supervisors' advice to do otherwise. Their research not only reveals the source of these linguistic anomalies, but also asserts the importance of a phenomenological approach to the study of linguistic behavior in corporate and classroom settings. In a meticulous investigation of the use of the phrase *do so* in written and spoken language, Michael P. Jordan tests a theoretical claim (about environments in which *do so* is used) against a large corpus of examples from written and spoken texts. He also explains criteria for comprehensive investigations of language use, discussing the relevance of such study to the development of functional language theory. Part I closes with Mary Ann Eiler's careful analysis of thematic structure as it reveals written text genre. Evaluating the work on thematic structure by Halliday and several other linguists, Eiler assimilates this scholarship in an analysis of a scientific text, demonstrating how thematic structure is a heuristic feature enabling genre identification.

The essays in Part II explore how language systems function in text to convey meaning. Each explains how written texts reveal situational conditions leading to their composition and constrain readers' possible interpretations. In my own essay, I propose a systematic analysis of ideation in text that reveals linguistic correlates of ideational value. The proposed model represents both textual and extratextual meaning systems that come into play in the construction and interpretation of written text. Deborah Brandt analyzes the structure of three texts composed by the same student writer, showing how these texts' exophoric references, cohesive devices, and thematic structure reveal the social contexts in which each of them were produced. Edward L. Smith, Jr. compares linguistic choices that develop author-reader relationships in the writing of experienced and inexperienced writers to demonstrate how interpersonal functioning is systematically developed in effective writing. In the final essay here, Michael Hoey and Eugene Winter show how clause relational analysis, an examination of lexical and grammatical features that direct a reader's cognitive process of relating ideas in discourse, explains the underlying interaction between writer's intention and reader's interpretation.

The essays in Part III concentrate in part on the question of how written

language works but more directly on the question of what it does to readers. These studies test possible correlations between teacher-ratings of quality in student writing and the presence of linguistic features associated with specific communicative functions. Each essay also provides an explanation of experimental methodology and evaluates results as they suggest future research. Carolyn G. Martnett extends other scholars' investigations of the relationship between textual cohesion and writing quality; she identifies two global categories of cohesive devices influencing topic maintenance and development and tests whether the presence of one, the other, or both influences readers' perceptions of quality. Christine A. Hult examines how linguistic markers of overall structure or rhetorical frame affect readers' evaluation of communicative effectiveness. Pamela Peters, applying an adaptation of Halliday's semantic system, determines through experiment whether linguistic features that assert a dominant semantic function have an impact on a teacher's grades in academic writing.

Part IV concludes the volume with four essays that directly apply functional language theory to teaching composition. Stephen A. Bernhardt offers an insightful explanation of functional language theory as it is relevant to teaching writing (an essay particularly useful to instructors who are not familiar with systemic theory). Martin Davies explores an often ignored aspect of written text—its reference to intonational meaning—illustrating through a 'reading aloud' experiment how intonational meaning reveals sources of difficulty for readers in written text. The final two essays, Frances Christie's and James R. Martin and Joan Rothery's, examine children's writing as it expresses genre, drawing two different though equally compelling conclusions about the importance of teaching both teachers and students the linguistic components of generic structure in school writing.

All the essays here are bold in their scope, imaginative in their approach, and responsive to a pressing need for teachers, students, readers, and writers to acquire a systematic understanding of the functions of written communication. The task they approach is as difficult and complex as language itself; thus, it is not surprising that the contributors to this volume often challenge the reader with more questions than their scholarship answers. My hope, and I trust the hope of every author here, is that our readers will join with us to meet that very challenge in continuing to examine written language in ways that join the epistemic aims of theory, research, and practice.

In closing, I wish to thank Robin P. Fawcett and Frances Pinter for endorsing this project and Wayne State University for providing me with support for preparing the manuscript. My deepest thanks go to Joyce R. Buchanan, who entered manuscripts and corrections on the wordprocessor, and to Richard W. Bailey who advised me in my selection and review of manuscripts submitted for this collection. Lastly, I thank my husband, Paul, and my parents, Angela and Chester Zawacki, for their loving support.

*Barbara Couture*  
*Ann Arbor, Summer 1985*

## NOTES

1. 'Composition' here includes studies in rhetoric and in the teaching of speech and writing.
2. I must note that this is the very point that Fish fails to understand in his criticism of Halliday's stylistics. He mistakes Halliday's analysis of the transitivity patterns in Golding's *The Inheritors* as a narrow effort to prove a Darwinian interpretation of the novel. It is true that Halliday offers this perspective as a context for interpretation, but his major conclusion from the transitivity analysis is simply to show that Golding's novel presents human experience in a way that differs strikingly from the ordinary ways in which speakers of English relate experience and thus highlights the relation of experience in itself as something the reader should interpret in a special way. Halliday concludes that a 'theme that is strongly foregrounded' by a special use of language 'is especially likely to be interpreted at more than one level' (1971: 360), a point that Fish himself suggests in asserting that Halliday's grammatical analysis in the end suggests 'that the explanation for . . . meaning is not the capacity of a syntax to express it, but the ability of a reader to confer it' (Fish 1973: 129).

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