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Part II

Exploring the processes of written language production and interpretation

4 Effective ideation in written text: a functional approach to clarity and exigence

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4.1 TOWARD AN ANALYSIS OF EFFECTIVE TEXTUAL IDEATION

As scholars and writers, we no doubt have more than once uttered 'I tried to write that piece today, but I didn't have any good ideas.' And oddly enough that lament often follows tireless sessions when we have generated lots and lots of ideas on paper, but none we regard as 'good.' Though the problem of distinguishing a 'good' idea in writing has plagued generations of writers and many more readers, scholars have not yet produced a FUNCTIONAL DESCRIPTION of the written communication of a valued idea.

In my view, a functional description of effective ideation in written text should balance expectations for completeness and utility. A COMPLETE description would reflect all the kinds of semantic choice realized in any kind of actual written discourse that conveys ideas effectively in any kind of situation. (We are a long way from a 'complete' description of this kind; nevertheless, scholars of written discourse in a variety of settings have identified several features that support and clarify the communication of ideas.) A USEFUL description would have heuristic value for writers, aiding their efforts to generate ideas that communicate effectively for themselves and to their readers. They can appeal to many handbooks advising how to organize literary and expository texts and ensure audience appeal, but none that I have seen provide a comprehensive, manageable heuristic for effective ideation.

In this chapter, I define effective textual ideation and propose a functional scale of linguistic features that promote it. My scale describes effective ideation as a function of linguistic choice, ranging from more elliptical to more explicit expression. In developing this scale, I begin from the premise that an effective idea in text conveys a message about a topic with clarity and exigence for both the writer and reader in a given context. Textual scholarship in several disciplines suggests that clarity and exigence are addressed through two kinds of meaning systems: TEXTUAL LOGIC and SEMIOTIC CONVENTION. These two systems are realized in written text through a range of grammatical and lexical features that make more or less

explicit reference to their underlying structures. Experimental modeling suggests that we can explain effective textual ideation by analyzing on an 'explicitness' scale those linguistic choices that convey conceptual logic and contextualize the discourse. As my analysis of a sample written text shows, a network describing effective ideation must account for both kinds of semantic systems in order to accurately explain ideation in written text and to have heuristic utility for writers.

4.1.1 A definition of effective ideation

The definition of 'effective ideation' adopted here is derived from descriptions of valued textual communication in both rhetoric and literature. Valued written communication, whether poetic or transactional, is pointed and purposeful and displays qualities of conceptual clarity and contextual exigence. In short, a valued poem as well as a valued essay conveys a discernable message that has some kind of felt relevance to the writer or reader in a given context. This definition of valued written communication, though static, has behind it a sense of the process of writing and reading both as a discovery of new ways of thinking and as an assimilation of these concepts in the thought processes of writer and reader.

The rhetorical objectives of 'logical message' and 'situational relevance' are substantiated by current research and teaching practice. In their highly regarded text *Rhetoric: Discovery and Change*, Young, Becker, and Pike, for example, claim that the 'ethical goal' of prose writers is to 'be discoverers of new truths as well as preservers and transmitters of the old.' In constructing a message for rhetorical discourse, writers must discover 'an ordering principle, or hypothesis' that governs the hierarchical arrangement of information that will be presented in the discourse. In constructing the shape of the discourse, the writer looks for 'shared experiences, shared knowledge, shared beliefs, values, and attitudes, shared language' (1970: 9, 120, 172).

Similar objectives guide effective literary writing, though the way in which these objectives are instantiated are quite different. In citing a similarity of objectives in literary and transactional communication, we are, of course, positing a view of literature which assumes an appeal to a reader. Holland elaborates this view in a psychoanalytic approach to reading, claiming that the literary audience reads with the aim of perceiving and creating the thematic focus of a text, its message. The individual in constructing this message while reading, recreates his or her own identity, reconfirms experiences shared with others, and makes a 'creative push to achieve new satisfaction,' to make new discoveries and insights (1975: 125). Holland concludes that the goal of literary criticism is to explore the individual and communal messages of texts as interpreted and made new by readers:

... the true focus of criticism has to be the relation between oneself and the text, and the sensible thing for literary people to do is to acknowledge that focus and write and talk accordingly, sharing our samenesses and differences in interpretation so as to create an evergrowing resource of responses we can share. [1975: 248]

Holland distinguishes the processes of individual and group text apprecia-

tion as processes of discovering one's own identity and one's relationship to a group through interacting with a text, processes that appear to parallel Young, Becker, and Pike's description of effective composition: one must both make an individual discovery and locate its shared features with the outside context.

In sum, a text's literary or rhetorical value is bound up with its potential both to promote logical **CONCEPTUALIZATION** (that is, reconstruction of a message) and semiotic **CONTEXTUALIZATION** (that is, incorporation of extra-textual meaning systems that give the text message situational relevance). This view suggests that we can evaluate textual meaning-potential by ranking a text's features as they contribute to the reader's conceptualization and contextualization of its content.

I suggest that a scale that ranks **EXPLICITNESS OF EXPRESSION** holds promise as a tool for correlating text features with ideational effectiveness. At one end of the scale are text features that express messages in a highly elliptical, perhaps even cryptic form. To comprehend the meaning of these messages, the reader must go beyond the text to make the logical connections necessary to understand the message intended. A well-known example of elliptical text is the prose of Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*. An ordinary reading of the logical relations implied by the grammar and lexis of that text does little to uncover its sense; a meaningful interpretation of the novel requires extensive reference to contextual meaning systems—some invented by Joyce, others extant in multi-national myth and culture. Readers who do not have access to the contextual meaning that enhances Joyce's work are not likely to interpret it in the same way as those who do, if they can make much sense of it at all. Further, it is doubtful that any reader would interpret the work as Joyce might have done. At the other end of the explicitness scale are features that make meaning clear with the least possibility of conflicting interpretation. Equally competent speakers and readers of the same language would interpret the message of a highly explicit text similarly. An example of such explicit discourse is a technical writer's description for a general audience of a piece of equipment, such as a thermometer or a pressure gauge. Generally, the technical writer's aim is to have the reader understand the text message in the same way that he or she does. Language in this kind of discourse makes clear reference to concepts, objects, and persons in the experience of large numbers of people.

Ranking the features of a text on a scale of explicitness of expression, I believe, can tell us why some texts fail to convey messages effectively in certain contexts and others succeed in doing so. Ranking on an explicitness scale requires a clear description of what is meant by explicit textual ideation. This description, in turn, requires an explicit understanding of the underlying structure of semantic systems evoked through textual ideation.

4.1.2 Logical and semiotic meaning

The structure of written discourse reflects two kinds of meaning systems: **LOGICAL** meaning which is realized in a discourse's propositional content

and SEMIOTIC meaning which is realized in the discourse's reference to meaning systems above language and outside the text. The combinatory potential of these two kinds of meaning enables a text to convey ideas to its readers. Theorists and empiricists have described this simultaneous functioning of logical and semiotic meaning in various ways.

In a philosophical approach to text analysis, Ricoeur explains the communicative function of both literary and non-literary text in terms of interactive 'propositional' and 'dialogic' meaning. Discourse conveys 'propositional content' through the fundamental opposition of the linguistic properties of 'identification' (or subject meaning) and 'predication in one and the same sentence'; discourse creates contextual relevance through social 'dialogical' constraint which puts the propositional content in a context that can be mutually shared by speaker/author and listener/reader. Propositional content pushes ideas forward while 'the dialogue reduces the field of misunderstanding concerning the propositional content and partially succeeds in overcoming the non-communicability of the experience' (Ricoeur 1976: 10, 11, 17).

Through conducting extensive analyses of both text and reader response, van Dijk and Kintsch have demonstrated empirically the simultaneous working of logical and semiotic systems in written discourse production and interpretation. Their theory directly focuses on the text as it traces logical and contextual meaning at both the micro- (sentence) and macro- (discourse) level. They describe the logical structure of discourse as a composition of semantic units that identify 'propositions' and 'superordinate propositions' (1983: 45–7). The contextual structure of discourse, in their view, is achieved through its reference to conventional knowledge frameworks, or schemas, which can be elaborated by a number of textual variables. A schema functions much as the abstract 'dialogic' property that Ricoeur attributes to textual communication; it 'provides the reader with a basis for interpreting the text,' helping the reader to fill in 'gaps' in his or her construction of its propositional content:

Missing information can be assigned default values if it appears insignificant, or it can be actively looked for in the text. Deviations from the schema either may be accepted and registered, or, if they appear to be major ones, may become the bases for a problem-solving effort trying to account for them. [1983: 48]

Van Dijk and Kintsch mention several empirical studies of their own and other scholars that validate readers' reference both to propositional structure and conventional schemas as critical input for the interpretation of unfamiliar texts. Like Ricoeur, they explain the dynamics of textual interpretation as a process of simultaneously constructing logical sense and rooting information in an extra-textual semiotic, creating situational relevance.

4.1.3 Implications of logical and semiotic semantics for ideational description

The interplay of logical and semiotic meaning in textual interpretation

suggests that we must explain effective ideation in two ways; we must evaluate textual features as they promote the understanding of a text's logical content (conceptualization) and the relating of textual content to extratextual systems (contextualization). This criterion does not imply that we speculate about how individuals think, accounting for the dynamics of perception and reasoning, nor about how they interact, explaining how social concourse creates semiotic meaning systems. Rather, it requires that we describe reader conceptualization and contextualization as these processes are triggered by linguistic choice.

Although the two ideational systems we seek to explain are highly complex, their underlying structures are fairly transparent. We can cite remarkable similarity in scholars' current research into logical and semiotic ideation in text—similarity despite major disagreements as to whether textual meaning is a function of conceptualization or of contextualization or both.

4.2 LOGICAL CONCEPTUALIZATION AS A FUNCTION OF TEXT

4.2.1 The logical semantic system

Scholars' descriptions of logical conceptualization of textual meaning generally refer to three kinds of components, realized by a variety of means in single sentences and in entire discourses: topics, comments about topics, and logical connections between the two.

At the sentence level, topics correspond to sentence subjects, comments to the statements made about the topics (which often contain other topics that stand in some logical relation to the sentence subject), and logical connections to connectives explicit in specific vocabulary items (e.g. a relationship of contrast as expressed by the verb *differ*) or in grammatical connections (e.g. a relationship of contrast made by the coordinator *rather*). At the discourse level, topics correspond to theme sentences or introductory paragraphs, comments to support arguments, and logical connections to transitions.

Scholars' identification of these three elements as central to logical conceptualization of discourse meaning is fairly consistent. Van Dijk, for example, describes a three-component structure when he identifies propositions as the 'semantic structures defining texts, action, and cognition, both at the micro- and macrolevel.' A proposition contains a predicate and one or more arguments; the predicate expresses 'a relation between individual objects,' that is, between the arguments, which in turn are ordered and have different functions such as 'Agents, Patients, Instruments, Sources, [and] Goals' (1980: 16, 17). These functions stand in logical relation to one another as the object talked about (topic) and as the objects (comments) in dependent relation (connection) to those talked about.

This 'topic-comment-connection' structure is not exclusive to expository discourse. In developing his theory of SUBJECTIVE CRITICISM, Bleich claims:

'Even the most complex acts of language may be viewed as necessary logical variants of predicative acts. Predication is not simply a linguistic structure; it is the elemental form of conceptual thought.' He goes on to describe predication or the creation of ideas in language as the 'linkage of topic and comment,' an internal subjective 'act of symbol formation consisting of two parts, each dependent on the other, confined strictly to words . . .' (1978: 50, 51).

In a series of essays on an individual's relationship to language, Percy refers to an irreducible system of three components that enables ideational communication. He describes Helen Keller's remarkable discovery of the logical connection between *water*, the physical liquid, and *WATER*, the word, as an emblematic instance of a triadic logical relation he calls the 'delta factor.' Extending the delta metaphor to ideas as realized in a sentence, Percy explains that a 'sentence utterance is a triadic event involving a coupler and the two elements of the uttered sentence,' the two elements being the subject and predicate (or topic and comment) (1975: 167).

But Percy makes an important distinction in the semantic triad underlying ideation: the two elements connected in a sentence may be two symbols (subject and predicate) or a symbol and the object it symbolizes (the distinction of the 'signifier' and the 'signified'). He notes further that the coupling, though represented sententially, is actually done 'by the utterer' and by the 'receiver of a sentence,' each of whose 'couplings' of word with object or word with word or topic with comment will differ. Given this eventuality, Percy contends that a model of communication must account for the separate coupling of two components by the utterer and receiver. He further defines 'successful' communications as 'those transactions in which the same elements are coupled by both utterer and receiver and in the same mode of coupling' (1975: 167).

If we join these congruent perspectives, we can easily derive from them a diagram of the writer and reader's processes of logical conceptualization as they both interact with a text. Figure 4.1 shows an idealized successful

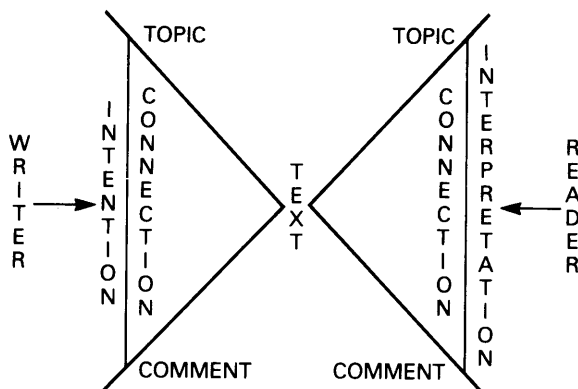


Figure 4.1 Idealized view of logical conceptualization

communication event where the processes of writer and reader conceptualization are parallel—that is, the writer's intention matches the reader's interpretation. If we accept van Dijk's notion of the proposition as the basic unit of conceptual meaning in text at the micro- and macrolevel, the diagram serves as a representation of the communication of the overall message of unified discourse and of each of the many separate messages conveyed at the sentence level and below. If we adopt Percy's view of effective communication, we assume the processes of intention and interpretation to have the same result.

Some readers, of course, would find problematic the definition of valued ideation as that where meaningful connections are made in 'the same' way by utterer and receiver. On the one hand, it ignores the filtering of the text through the separate psychological states (which can never be totally synchronous) of author and audience. On the other hand, it fails to account for texts that are engaging and satisfying precisely because their logical structure 'deconstructs' probable conceptualizations of the writer/reader by presenting opposing messages in the syntactic and rhetorical structure.¹ But, for the moment, let us accept this model and go on to explain how it is realized in written text.

4.2.2 The logical system as realized in text

Many scholars have classed textual features that contribute to building the topics, comments, and connections that promote logical conceptualization both at the sentence and discourse level.

We can cite first the work on sentence-level theme as it serves to point to the conceptual topic of a sentence (in Halliday's view, *THEME* is the initial element in a clause [see 1967: 212; see also Fries 1983; and Eiler in this volume]). Theme, along with the grammatical systems of transitivity and mood, operates to give ideational coherence to discourse. Though thematic structure 'is the text-forming structure in the clause,' it has a role in creating or eliminating semantic ambiguity (Halliday and Hasan 1976: 311). A comparison of two sentences that respectively show harmonious and disharmonious interplay of the linguistic systems of transitivity, mood, and theme demonstrates this process:

- (i) Susan stroked the cat gently.
- (ii) These ponies the children were given by their grandparents.

In sentence (i), the grammatical subject, informational theme, and situational actor occupy the same initial slot and are realized by the same formal item, *Susan*, leaving no ambiguity about the topic of the discourse. In sentence (ii), however, three topical foci are suggested. *The children* is the grammatical subject; however, *these ponies* names the informational focus of the sentence (its theme). The situational actor, *their grandparents*, appears neither as subject nor theme. Because it ambiguously cites three topical foci, the sentence creates functional disharmony and ambiguity about its central message (sentence (ii) and analysis are taken from Halliday and

Hasan 1976: 311). Analyses of the systems of transitivity, mood, and theme as they operate through grammar can explain how sentence structure supports or undermines conceptual logic as readers interpret it.

For descriptions of how topics are maintained within sentences and developed over longer stretches of text, we can cite the growing body of research on logical relations expressed both within and between sentences. In this domain, Hoey has made great strides in describing the textual source of two categories of basic meaning-relations, LOGICAL SEQUENCE and MATCHING:

Logical Sequence relations are relations between successive events or ideas, whether actual or potential. . . .

Matching relations are relations where statements are 'matched' against each other in terms of degrees of identity of description. [1983: 19-20]

In addition to identifying semantic categories of clause relations, Hoey classifies linguistic features as they signal clause relations and identifies grammatical connections (formed by subordinators and conjuncts), lexical connectives, and repetition as signals of clause relations (1983: 17-30; for additional descriptions of features that express clause relations, see Hartnett, Hoey and Winter, and Jordan in this volume).

In a similar effort to build a model of ideational relationships developed in discourse, Meyer posits five categories of logical relationships that operate in discourse: 'collection,' 'causation,' 'response,' 'comparison,' and 'description.' In effective discourse, the rhetorical relationships referenced and established in its top-level structure 'can serve to organize the text as a whole.' Meyer distinguishes the relationships between top-level and sentence-level structure by applying case grammar analysis (which names agents, actions, goals, and other participants in sentence-level propositions) to show how overall organizing principles are realized at the sentence level. Because the relationships in her model 'closely follow those suggested by the text,' Meyer claims that her system is well 'suited to examining logical relationships and comprehension of these relationships explicitly or implicitly stated in text' (1985: 17, 20, 33).

Clearly, analyses of actual discourse are available that show how semantic systems promoting logical conceptualization are realized in linguistic features at every level, from a particular formal item to a combination of features that signal overall discourse structure. I have discussed above only analyses of logical structure in expository prose; such descriptions of poetic language have also been attempted with success (see, for example, Jakobson 1960; and Halliday 1971). These multiple resources relating text structure to propositional logic can help account, though only partially, for effective textual ideation.

4.2.3 The logical system as heuristic for ideational value

If the object of written communication is to convey concepts clearly to a distant reader, we might conclude that the more explicitly a text points to topics, comments, and the connections between them, the more effectively it

will communicate ideas. To rank ideational effectiveness, we could simply categorize features at sentence and discourse level as they fall on a scale ranging from more elliptical to more explicit and conclude that the more features that contribute to explicit expression, the better. Such ranking would assume, of course, that 'clarity' is the essential determinant of effective textual ideation.

This ranking has some utility for explaining the failure of the student text in Figure 4.2 to articulate ideas effectively. This text, the first paragraph of an essay written as an assignment for a remedial class in college composition, neither develops topics nor makes logical connections between them. Further, it assaults the reader with macro-structuring devices that impose a logical structure at the discourse level that is not supported at the sentence level.

The sample text begins by naming a topic, *marriage*, and defining it with a dictionary definition. This gloss is followed by the question—*Why are marriages not surviving?*²—which is meant, the reader assumes, to convey the comment about the topic that will be expanded later. Yet no language intervenes between the dictionary definition of marriage and the rhetorical question that follows to suggest how these will be connected. We have no view of *marriage* that suggests that *survival* is an issue that relates to it conceptually, and certainly no inkling of that relationship is revealed in the definition offered. Despite this omission, the author goes on to name *reasons* why marriages are not surviving, creating further difficulty. She names broad, abstract topics, not specific reasons for the dissolution of *marriages*. The terms *economics*, *different opinions*, and *interest in other people* call up a host of associations, largely irrelevant to the essay's message about why marriages do not last. These terms are not collocated in any way; they are not lexical items chosen because they have a coherent relationship to the break-up of a social compact. In fact, each of these terms represents a *topic*, *comment*, and *connection* in itself that is not made explicit to the reader. For instance, *economics* could mean 'Marriages are not surviving because more and more couples are not prepared to share the responsibility for handling joint income,' and *interest in other people* could mean 'Young couples do not know how to keep relationships with the opposite sex from conflicting with those with their mates at home.'

An instructor in a basic composition course could do much to help a student make ideas more explicit in rhetorical discourse through analyzing the features that promote logical conception. If I were to rank on our explicitness scale the textual features discussed here, I would register them

What is a marriage? Webster's dictionary states it as being 'a journey in close association' or the 'joining of a man and woman in holy matrimony.' Now after marriage has been defined, Why are marriages not surviving? Perhaps Economics, Different opinions, or even a interest in other people, and of course there are other reasons, but these are just some reasons why, I want to point out.

Figure 4.2 First paragraph of student expository text (verbatim)

as highly elliptical. The student's elliptical style represents the kind of prose one might expect in the planning stages of expository writing. *Economics* and *different opinions* are much like the 'rich bit[s]' described by Flower and Hayes (see 1977: 456), key words the writer might come up with in planning a discourse to stand for complex ideas not yet fully elaborated. Although identifying this elliptical style helps us describe why this paragraph lacks clarity and hence is ineffective, it does not tell the whole story about its ineffective message development.

The EXPLICITNESS ranking tells us nothing about the writer's and reader's need for more explicit expression in order to conceptualize the message of the discourse. And that need will vary with internal and external constraints: first, with the internal constraint imposed by the writer/reader's personal assimilation of the text with his or her accumulated understanding of other things relative to it; and second, with the external constraint imposed by cultural expectations for a text in a particular communication context. We might define these constraints as reference to an INTERNAL and an EXTERNAL SEMIOTIC. However we designate them, we must account for them in our structural model of textual ideation.²

Internal semiotic constraints will dictate one range of explicit expression for the writer and one for the reader, both of them dependent on their individual, psychological needs for explicitness in order to comprehend the discourse in a given situation. External semiotic constraints will dictate another range for explicitness based on the text's relationship to conventional communication situations in the shared cultures of writer and reader.

I can easily demonstrate the relationship between one's internal semiotic and the need for explicit expression in writing by referring to a common form of transactional discourse: a shopping list. When I write a shopping list for myself, it is highly elliptical, with idiosyncratic abbreviations for products I purchase regularly. Were I to send someone else to the store with this list, I would find it necessary to 'fill in the blanks,' and to write out some abbreviations in full (my idiosyncratic ones), perhaps providing additional information about brand names of products I always choose but never cite on my list. My elliptical shopping list and the more explicit one for my helpful surrogate shopper are equally functional, but mine reflects my internal semiotic, my routine shopping ritual. Thus, it need not elaborate details of this routine because I know these perfectly well; they are stored in my internal semiotic.

But elliptical communication is not only meaningful to individuals, as my example suggests. Scholars have noted that elliptical text, whether transactional or literary, can be interpreted quite easily by large numbers of listeners and readers when it refers to an external semiotic shared by the discourse participants. For example, Hasan notes that, in ordinary conversation, elliptical expression can be perfectly clear when it evokes contextual meaning that is not explicit in the text. She remarks that elliptical texts that rely on outside contexts are characteristic of the 'implicit' (rather than 'explicit') verbal style:

The difference between explicit and implicit styles can be stated most conveniently in terms of what a normal person needs in order to interpret an utterance as it is intended by the speaker. Where explicit style is concerned, the correct interpretation of a message requires no more than a listener who has the average working knowledge of the language in question. When, however, the message is in the implicit style, its intended more precise meanings become available only if certain additional conditions are met. . . . [1984: 109]

Hasan's definition of 'implicit' and 'explicit' style does not place a value judgment on either style; rather it distinguishes a different set of requirements for the communicative success of each style.

In a similar discussion of ellipsis in poetic language, Barthes observes that ellipsis is not disturbing, perhaps not even noticed, when it operates in a known field of reference:

[The structures of ellipses] are altogether artificial, entirely learned; I am no longer any more astonished by La Fontaine's ellipses (yet, how many unformulated relays between the grasshopper's song and her destitution) than by the physical ellipsis which unites in a simple piece of equipment both electric current and cold, because these shortcuts are placed in a purely operative field: that of academic apprenticeship and of the kitchen. . . . [1977: 80]

Both Hasan and Barthes assume systems of meaning outside the text whose extralinguistic reality is confirmed by the communicative success of implicit and elliptical expression. But one's comfort with that reference is relative both to one's knowledge of the external meaning system that supplies logical connections and to one's willingness to accept potential ambiguity.

We cannot, then, solely develop a scale of ideational value on the basis of the more or less explicit expression of topics, comments, and the relationships between them at the sentence or discourse level. Explicitness of expression must be balanced against the psychological requirements of the reader and writer for message clarity and the range of 'explicitness' required or desired in certain communication situations—in short, against the text's relationship to internal and external semiotic systems.

We can, in fact, describe several conventional patterns of assimilated concepts shared in our culture that have linguistic correlates. Further, we have methods of assessing what external patterns of assimilation an individual is likely to evoke when approaching a text in certain kinds of contexts.

4.3 SEMIOTIC CONTEXTUALIZATION AS A FUNCTION OF TEXT

4.3.1 The semiotic semantic systems

Like logical conceptualization, the processes of semiotic contextualization realized in texts have generic components, though they are more numerous and form several varieties of semantic systems. Scholars have recently made great progress in describing conventional schemes common in written discourse. At the micro-level, these systems of choice form linguistic REGISTERS and at the macro-level, DISCOURSE GENRES. Perhaps the most

explicit descriptions of meanings evoked by registers and genres have been developed by systemic linguists (see, for example, Hasan 1977; Gregory and Carroll 1978; and Martin 1984).

Linguistic registers define conventional instances of 'language-in-action' (Gregory and Carroll 1978: 64). They are collections of certain lexical choices and conventional syntactic arrangements that express consistent simultaneous reference to a specific field, tenor, and mode associated with conventional discourse situations. The kind of language used by preachers in sermons forms a register, as does the kind of language used by sports reporters in giving the play-by-play description of a football game, and the language of scientists reporting experimental research results.

Linguistic genres define conventional instances of organized text. As defined here, 'genres' include conventional literary discourse forms, such as the short story, the novel, and the sonnet, and conventional varieties of non-literary text, such as the informational report, the proposal, and the technical manual.³ Although some linguistic registers are associated regularly with certain genres (for example, the language of scientific reporting is associated with the experimental research report), the choice of register is independent of the choice of genre (see Couture 1985).

4.3.2 The semiotic systems realized in texts

The selection of a register and of a genre imposes certain 'explicitness' constraints on a speaker/writer's expression of message and on a listener/reader's process of interpretation. Registers and genres communicate ideas in themselves that can either support or subvert the ideas a reader or writer might interpret as a function of a text's logical structure. We can illustrate these points by examining just a few aspects of some functional descriptions of registers and genres proposed recently for literary and expository discourse.

Registers are conventionally adopted ways of speaking or writing that often specify the attitude the reader is to take toward conceptualizing the ideas in the discourse. For instance, they determine the listener/reader's expectations that the discourse will develop hierarchically ordered logical relationships, that it will contain facts to be built upon in succeeding communications, and that it will require reference to some systems of meaning outside the text. These expectations are cued by conventional linguistic features that comprise a given register.

The language of newspaper reporting, as Crystal and Davy note, is structured to engage the reader in a reported 'story.' It often contains short clauses, initial adverbials, and short paragraphs, and it makes extensive use of coordination, giving readers a sense of immediacy and urgency and bringing them to the event as participants (see Crystal and Davy 1969: 180–5). This register, admittedly, is very broadly defined, overlapping many 'other varieties of English (such as scientific language)' and absorbing 'a great deal of idiosyncrasy on the part of . . . individual journalist[s].' Nevertheless, the reportorial aims of clarity and objectivity show in this style's

general avoidance of complex sentence structures that might possibly 'produce obscurity and unintelligibility' (Crystal and Davy 1969: 184, 190). Because the language of newspaper reporting (as opposed to editorializing) avoids explicit judgment, we expect it to contain fewer subordinators and embeddings indicating 'generalizations and support' or 'causes and consequences' or 'similarities and differences' than a more persuasive register might. The language of newspaper reporting invites the reader to assimilate the facts and events recorded and to offer his or her own interpretation; it expects its audiences to involve themselves in the act of making logical sense of its content.

Another written register, 'traditional bureaucratic language,' has the opposite function of disengaging the reader from the act of logical conceptualization while distancing the speaker/writer from the listener/reader. According to Redish, this style, which appears in bureaucratic memos, reports, and guidelines, is 'nominal, full of jargon, and legalistic.' It overtly denies the responsibility of the writer to make something clear to a reader, and through this distancing, it promotes the image of 'a strong, impersonal, and therefore impartial, institution' (1983: 152, 153, 162).

Several factors promote the continued use of this 'complexified style' in government offices—a style that 'is not just ordinary English with hard words and long sentences' but also negates the language's purpose to communicate. Among them are the government's tradition of using legalistic language, the image of the government as the 'impersonal guardian of the public welfare,' and writers' wish to associate themselves with the prestigious work of the government (Redish 1983: 161, 162). The writers of 'traditional bureaucratic language' either consciously or unconsciously choose to let the meaning of this register assert the institutional values of distance, prestige, and power and thus dominate the lexical and syntactic content of their discourses. For them, explicitness requirements are far less than for those who come to the discourse to absorb its content, not its assertion of social values.

Some registers do more than assert general attitudes toward the text. These varieties, often persistently referenced in ritualistic forums, evoke an entire set of ideas outside the text. This evocation can be so great that the particular content of a text in these registers does not add to the body of ideas referenced by the register itself.

Two examples of this ritualistic language, as we might call it, are 'religious' and 'Marxist' language. As Crystal and Davy note of the language of religion, the 'kind of language a speech community uses for the expression of its religious beliefs on public occasions is usually one of the most distinctive varieties it possesses' (1969: 147). The distinctiveness of religious language, they claim, is due to its cultural base in primary texts (the Bible and common prayers), traditional formulations of belief (linguistic variety is shunned as it risks 'inconsistency' and possible 'heresy'), and the 'revered ancestry' of 'familiar words and phrases' (1969: 149). The vocabulary of religious language is emblematic of historical precedences and postulates.

Barthes makes this same point about the ritualized, ideological register of Marxist language:

Marxist writing is presented as the language of knowledge. . . . It is the lexical identity of writing [in this language] which allows it to impose stability on its explanations and a permanence in its method. . . . Each word is no longer anything but a narrow reference to the set of principles which tacitly underlie it. . . . [It] is like an algebraical sign representing a whole bracketed set of previous postulates. [(1953) 1977: 23]

Marxist language interrupts the reader's efforts to create logical conceptualizations of the text content, asking the reader to rely on a set of ideas DEVELOPED OUTSIDE the text for a text's interpretation.

When a ritualistic register dominates a text, the reader's judgment of the text's ideational effect may have little to do with whether or not its lexical content and syntax suggest a new message; ideational value may instead be a function of the register's power to call up an old message intact, through symbolic reference to specific networks of meaning in an ideological semiotic.

While registers impose explicitness constraints at the level of vocabulary and syntax, genres impose additional explicitness constraints at the discourse level. They define conventional patterns of linguistic structure for a complete discourse, and they are intertextual—that is, they are defined by their capacity to evoke other texts. As Scholes explains: 'The genre is a network of codes that can be inferred from a set of related texts. A genre is as real as a language and exerts similar pressures through its network of codes, meeting similar instances of stolid conformity and playful challenge' (1985: 2). Both literary critics and rhetoricians traditionally associate genre with a complete, unified textual structure. Unlike register, genre can only be realized in completed texts or texts that can be projected as complete, for a genre does more than specify kinds of codes extant in a group of related texts; it specifies conditions for beginning, continuing, and ending a text.

The body of scholarship describing literary and transactional genres is immense, ranging from theoretical, philosophical discussions of discourse aims to pragmatic, prescriptive discussions of textual format. Both theoretical and empirical research suggests that readers and writers have overall expectations for how discourse in a conventional genre presents ideas in terms of referentiality and inference, and those expectations are reflected in a text's more or less explicit development of a message. In general, the writer's choice to write in an expository genre is a contract with the reader to communicate an explicit message, while the choice to write in a poetic genre is a promise to suggest implicit meaning.

Readers expect generic structure of expository discourse to complement and support the explicit development of a text message. In his *Conceptual Theory of Rhetoric*, D'Angelo asserts that all expository discourse represents a set of conventional 'logical and psychological patterns which listeners and readers of our language understand, and indeed anticipate' (1975: 18). These psychological 'patterns' are analogous to what linguists call generic structure, psychologists call schemas, and rhetoricians call rhetorical modes.

D'Angelo regards them as more than cultural conventions for conveying ideas: 'These patterns are symbol systems which are objectively distinct from thinking, yet which refer directly to it' (1975: 18).

The idea that expository genres reflect thinking patterns is a subject of debate as is the exact contribution of generic structure to readers' perception of ideational content. Mayer asserts that readers have to locate an overall structure at the macro-level to 'learn' new ideas from prose. For instance, readers should anticipate the subsequent schematic design when searching for 'idea units' in a scientific explanatory text: a 'rule' statement or 'the most general statement of the observed relationship among variables'; explanations of the rule that give 'the underlying components, show[ing] how they relate to one another, and how they account for the rule'; and a 'causal chain' relating these components (1985: 73-5).

While looking for a schema may be helpful to a reader in processing expository prose, a clearly developed schema may not be the key to effective ideation in all referential discourse. Kieras asserts that the explicit development of logical relationships at the sentence level is more relevant to a reader's understanding of the ideas of a technical passage than the articulation of an overall design or schema: 'The schema notion seems to have very little applicability to the comprehension of technical prose. A more appropriate theoretical approach would be one emphasizing those aspects of comprehension that work at the level of processing individual content facts' (1985: 94). In general, however, analyses of expository or referential prose design suggest that effective expository writing follows conventional generic patterns that emphasize logical relations, such as CAUSE AND EFFECT, GENERALIZATION AND SUPPORT, and QUESTION AND ANSWER. Of course, research on reader-response to ideas in expository prose has for the most part concentrated upon comprehension, not upon the overall effectiveness of idea presentation. Not surprisingly, such research tends to demonstrate that more comprehensible discourse has a macro- and micro-structure that makes topics and comments and logical relations explicit. Whether the ideational thrust of ALL expository texts puts a premium on comprehension is open to question. An internal memo written in 'traditional bureaucratic language' may thwart the outside reader's efforts to perceive logical structure, yet effectively communicate institutional values and be regarded internally as successful. Nevertheless, the fact that so much research has been devoted to logical comprehension in itself suggests that it is highly valued in referential genres.

By contrast, emotional satisfaction appears to be most valued when readers search for ideas in literary discourse. Explorations of reader-response to literary works have distinguished two kinds of satisfaction that readers get from ideas presented in literary text: the satisfaction of pattern construction that comes from reading literature regarded as art and the satisfaction of pattern recognition that comes from reading popular literature.

In drawing up a taxonomy of discourse types, Applebee claims that literature we value highly in our culture provokes 'conflict within the paradigms

of each succeeding generation, pushing towards a new and broader perspective' (1977: 94). When popular literature draws upon our sense of pleasure at being presented with a pattern, we can enjoy and explore it thoroughly, as in 'play':

The pleasure that [popular literature offers] . . . is a pleasure of mastery, and just as a child becomes bored when he has fully mastered a skill, dropping some of its elements from his play and taking up new problems, so too we can expect the reader to become bored when he has mastered the principles underlying the stories he is reading. [1977: 87]

Although Applebee does not say as much, I believe the pleasure of popular literature is also the pleasure of the familiar. Like confiding in a trusted friend, reading a popular novel (or watching a TV serial) is a 'safe' activity that places us in a world where answers are always found and expectations are always met. Readers of business writing experience a similar pleasure from discourse that follows the standard format for a lab report, a bid proposal, or a policy statement.

The tension between familiarity and discovery not only distinguishes literary discourse types, but also creates a polar distinction between poetic and prosaic registers within literary genres. Barthes makes an elegant statement of this polar distinction in describing the linguistic aims of classical and modern poetry:

Images [in classical poetry] are recognizable in a body; they do not exist in isolation; they are due to long custom, not to individual creation. . . . Classical conceits involve relations, not words: they belong to an act of expression, not of invention. . . .

. . . Modern poetry, since it must be distinguished from classical poetry and from any type of prose, destroys the spontaneously functional nature of language, and leaves standing only its lexical basis. . . . Connections are not properly speaking abolished, they are merely reserved areas, a parody of themselves, and this void is necessary for the density of the Word to rise out of a magic vacuum, like a sound and a sign devoid of background, like 'fury and mystery'. [(1953) 1977: 45-7]

Barthes' contrasting descriptions of classical and modern poetry distinguish 'prosaic' and 'poetic' discourse styles; a distinction that can be made in texts called either 'poetry' or 'prose.' Poetic language proposes new relations between concepts, relations that contrast with those conventionally drawn in prosaic or ordinary language. Whether a text's language is perceived as poetic or prosaic is dependent on the relative novelty of its logical structure. The conventions of classical poetry, now regarded as prosaic, in their beginnings must have appeared inventive. Now these conceits form a register, and the overall design of classical poems has become generic.

The register of poetic language, at the elliptical end of our explicitness scale, contrasts with conventional language use; the genre of modern poetry, an innovative structural framework for completed text, contrasts with traditional literary genres: modern poetry is generic in its potential to define a complete discourse, yet unique in its historical relationship to structures of previous text.

Unlike register, genre identifies a discourse as text; like register, it establishes a semantic space in which discourse makes a certain range of sense. When an author writes a report or a poem, the reader has certain expectations for the kinds of logical relations to be presented in either, the former to be more explicit and conventional and the latter to be more implicit and unique. Genre, like register, can also be invoked by an author to present a message in itself—conveyed in a complete conventional structure. In fact, generic structure in what Smith calls ‘prefabricated discourse’ is the text’s message: ‘Though the statement [of greeting card verse] is personal, it is not the statement of the person who composed it. . . . In fact, no one is saying it, and it is not a message. . . . [It] is designed to *be* a message under appropriate circumstances’ (1978: 58). Smith cites ‘greeting card’ verse as a typical prefabricated discourse; we might add ‘self-help’ essays as well. When prefabricated utterances such as these are expressed on the ‘right’ occasions, the reader calls up cued sentiments and feelings and does not attempt to decode a message from the lexical content and syntactic structure of the text.

In sum, registers and genres control the reader’s interpretation of textual messages in two ways:

- They designate whether or not the reader should rely on a text’s lexical and syntactic content to uncover a message—that is, whether the reader should expect the text’s logical development to be explicit or implicit.
- They express meanings in themselves that may support or deny messages derived from a text’s propositional content.

Both these message functions have implications for effective textual ideation.

4.3.3 The semiotic systems as heuristics for ideational value

In section 4.2.3, I asserted that explicitness of expression had a functional correlate in ‘clarity,’ but that clarity is not all that determines the effectiveness of textual ideation. The textual expression must also have *EXIGENCE*—that is, it must be relevant to the assimilated knowledge systems of the writer and reader in the shared context the text invokes. In choosing the word *exigence* to describe effective contextual meaning, I have called upon the dual process of conceptualization and contextualization to enhance a complex concept.

In my view, a text’s exigence is its ability to become an integral part of a situation requiring a joining of minds, perceptions, and values. In Bitzer’s view, exigence is a component of the text’s rhetorical situation:

Exigence is the necessary condition of a rhetorical situation. If there were no exigence, there would be nothing to require or invite change in the audience or in the world—hence, there would be nothing to require or invite the creation and presentation of pragmatic messages. When perceived, the exigence provides the motive. [1980: 26]

Bitzer separates the exigence of a situation from the exigence of the text whose development ‘commences with the critical relation between persons

and environment and the process of interaction leading to harmonious adjustment' (1980: 25). I believe that a text that is situationally relevant is an exigence in itself; it provides a meeting place for ideas and persons that will coalesce to generate new situational exigences. The text's appropriate relationship to registers and genres, and to the semiotic systems that establish situational relevance, enables its emergence as an exigence.

To achieve an 'appropriate relationship' to systems of genre and register, a text must contain lexical and syntactic choices that:

- consistently represent registers and genres accessed;
- harmoniously combine selections from conventional registers and genres; and
- effectively balance the message functions implied by genre and register with the messages implied by its propositional content.

The first criterion has obvious utility: if a reader cannot discern the text's reference to a register or genre because the text's features do not clearly point to particular systems, the text's capacity to attain situational relevance is diminished or misdirected.

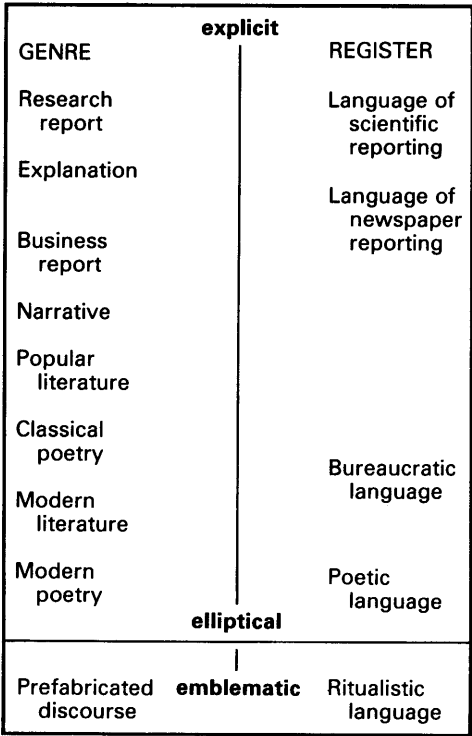


Figure 4.3 Ranking of registers and genres on scale for explicitness of expression

As the scholarship mentioned in section 4.2.2 suggests, we can rank both genres and registers as they impose a demand for logical explicitness in a given text. As the ranking in Figure 4.3 displays, the selection of the RESEARCH REPORT genre coupled with the selection of the LANGUAGE OF SCIENTIFIC REPORTING carries with it stringent expectations for logical explicitness, whereas selection of the NARRATIVE REPORT along with its complementary register, THE LANGUAGE OF NEWSPAPER REPORTING carries with it a lesser demand for explicitness of logical relationships. The choice to communicate in an emblematic register or genre, such as ritualistic language and prefabricated discourse, is a choice to avoid or defer all personal responsibility for the explicit expression of an idea. In fact, the concept of explicit expression is irrelevant in these systems (hence, they are placed outside the proposed scale). Here the writer chooses simply to reference whole systems of ideas called up from somewhere outside the text. The effectiveness of discourse in this register and genre is dependent upon the adequacy of the speaker/writer's articulation of the features of these systems.

Since the two sides of the scale are independent, a writer could select a genre that implies a high degree of explicitness (like a business report) and at the same time select a register that demands less explicitness (such as bureaucratic language). In doing so, the writer must decide which criteria for explicitness he or she wishes to dictate linguistic choice (clear hierarchical development of message and support demanded by the REPORT genre or implicit expression of the cultural values of impartiality, power, and prestige associated with BUREAUCRATIC style). Ranking of registers and genres on an explicitness scale may help explain why writers have difficulty addressing some contexts successfully: when a situation makes contradictory demands, the writer may choose a register and genre with disparate explicitness requirements, rather than couple selections from harmonious systems. The ranking can also reveal ways that writers fail to balance effectively the message potential of these semiotic systems against the lexical and syntactic content of their texts. An application of the scale to the student text in Figure 4.2 provides an illustration of this point.

The generic form of the sample text is EXPLANATORY ESSAY, and the student writer, in part, has executed its features adequately. She begins by naming and defining her topic; then she names the aspect of the topic she intends to explain (*why marriages are not surviving*) and gives reasons that provide the explanation. The overall structure resembles the pattern for 'scientific explanation' described by Mayer (1985). However, the register she has chosen to execute her explanation is not appropriate for this genre; her language is poetic, requiring the reader to make connections based on the syntactic placement of concepts and their relationship to conventional, cultural views of marriage.

We can highlight this poetic use of terminology by reorganizing a portion of the student text to take the form of a poem, as shown in Figure 4.4. When structured as such, elliptical reference to *economics* and *different opinions* seems somewhat more acceptable to the reader because the genre itself contextualizes the discourse in a situation where explicit reference is not

<p>Why are marriages not surviving?</p> <p>Perhaps</p> <p>Economics</p> <p>Different opinions, or even an interest in other people</p> <p>and, of course there are other reasons, but</p> <p>these are just some reasons why (I want to point out)</p>
--

Figure 4.4 Student text structured as a poem

demanding and ambiguous reference is valued. The fact that the words *Economics* and *Different* are capitalized here (as they were in the original) suggests that the author is imbuing these words with a special sense, a sense not suggested by their dictionary meanings. The parenthetical reference to the narrator's view highlights the poem's dual function as an artifact and personal expression, giving the message meaning in both a universal and personal sense.

Of course, the text in Figure 4.4 is not a very good poem, but I would be willing to say that it is a better poem than it is an expository composition! In so saying, I have identified another source of the original text's failure to achieve effective ideation—it fails to meet the reader's expectation for communication in the genre it ostensibly represents. In referencing an explanatory genre in its overall structure, the author obligates herself to provide explicit logical development. The text fails because she selects a register with explicitness constraints that do not allow her to fulfill that promise.

4.4 SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

In this chapter, I have demonstrated that effective ideation is a function of two kinds of meaning systems realized through text: conceptual logic and contextual semiotic. Through systematic lexical and syntactic choices that express logical relationships between topics and comments at the discourse and sentence level, the text promotes the reader's conceptualization of its overall message. Through linguistic choices that comprise registers (conventional ways of saying things in certain contexts) and genres (conventional forms of overall discourse structure), texts present a relevant context for ideational interpretation.

When a text expresses conceptual messages with a level of explicitness appropriate to its articulation of register and genre, it is more likely to be

ideationally effective. I say more likely, because although all the linguistic selections suggested by logic and the cultural semiotic may be consistent and well coordinated to develop a unified message, the value of the message is still subject to the individual judgment of writer and reader. The reader will evaluate whether the choices of register and genre are situationally apt and whether the text maintains a proper balance between its reference to these systems and its propositional content.

Even given this important limitation, it seems worthwhile to explore the capacity of a dual perspective on textual meaning to describe linguistic choice as it influences readers' interpretation. This latter objective has many challenging consequences; here I will elaborate just four of them.

First, examining discourse as it expresses logical and semiotic meaning systems may explain why texts receive mixed reviews from their readers. One source of possible difficulties may be the selection of a register and genre which have conflicting explicitness requirements for logical development (like the student text examined here). Another might be selection of features from several different registers or several different genres in the same text, giving conflicting messages about the appropriate contextualization of the text message (see Couture 1985). Studies of texts that display purposeful, controlled selection of features from a variety of genres versus texts that mix genres unsuccessfully may reveal text heuristics for combining genres for special purposes.

Second, a dual semantic analysis may result in a more informed approach to teaching style and form. Execution of appropriate style and format for a given situation requires the careful integration of linguistic choices from several systems of meaning. Actual texts present a mix of styles and forms that make them exigent in their response to a particular situation. Writers not only need to know what features distinguish register and genre, but also how they are melded in some communications to meet needs not satisfied by the particular articulation of a single system of conventions.

Third, attention to texts' capacities to express logic and to relate to a context may reveal the historic source of linguistic idiosyncrasy in communications that address particular contexts—idiosyncracies that may work against the ideational effectiveness of these communications. Some investigations in this vein have been made for military communications, particularly personnel reports used to evaluate officers for promotions. Haering (1980) suggests that the conflicting aims of evaluating an officer and making an argument for promotion in the same discourse have resulted in Navy personnel developing a strictly codified language that in effect means something quite different from what might be inferred from a propositional analysis of its content. Because high performance ratings are necessary for promotion, officers making evaluations have adopted a personnel rating scale and evaluative descriptors that consist almost entirely of superlatives. A comparison of the propositional content of this specialized communication with the contextual meaning attributed to it could uncover sources of communicative dysfunction and provide an analytic impetus for change.

Finally, a dual perspective on the meaning systems referenced in written

communications can help writers to address larger concerns about how their communications contribute to current epistemologies. To assert that effective ideation represents a balance between conceptual clarity and contextual exigence is to confirm that neither intellectual logic nor appeal to situational variables alone presumes communicative success—a position that poses difficulties for those who through their writing would seek universal truths, ideas devoid of bias toward a particular way of seeing or doing things. Yet even if writers consciously choose to strip their prose of contextual bias in an effort to be maximally inventive, their efforts will not be entirely successful.

The power of contextual constructs to bias inventive thinking is more insidious than many of us may wish to believe. For instance, Miller (1978) suggests that Western culture as a whole is limited in its efforts to seek new knowledge because of its reliance upon technological semiosis to seek answers to human problems. Inhabitants of a technologized culture seek answers to questions, rather than new questions to answer; technologized cultures have substituted 'closed-system [deductive] logic for open-system reason.' Closed-system logic shapes modern science and 'has become a self-justifying necessity' (Miller: 233, 234). The consequences are awesome:

If we believe that our relationship with the world is objective, that the external world determines our knowledge of it, then the concept of ethos evaporates—there can be no character to our knowledge or action, other than the idiosyncratic or the mistaken. That loss is the most rhetorically powerful consequence of technology. [1978: 236]

In short, if we believe that only certain ways of seeking knowledge of the world are 'truthful,' we prejudice ourselves against genuine discovery and ultimately against change.

In this chapter I have proposed an analytic system of ideational value in written discourse, outlined the components of that system, suggested its heuristic value, and assessed its explanatory power. But in doing so, I have only begun to do what we must in order to describe how any kind of text functions—that is, explore how language unites our worlds and ourselves.

NOTES

1. DeMan observes with some awe this tendency in both literature and criticism, claiming that it makes these kinds of texts the 'most rigorous' and the 'most unreliable language in terms of which man names and modifies himself,' a paradox central to their interpretive value (1979: 140).
2. Schmidt supports this imperative in a thoughtful examination of criteria for a comprehensive communicative text theory. He claims that two semantic analyses are possible for any textual communication event: one 'intensional' interpretation and the other 'extensional' interpretation:

One might postulate a process of linear *intensional* interpretation where a recipient decides (during the linear reading of the textformula) which cognitive structure stored in his memory he assigns to syntactically analyzed structures[;] ... in

- addition one might postulate a process of *extensional* interpretation where the recipient has to decide whether the intensionally interpreted structures/elements of structures can be referentially related to a real or fictive world. [1977: 57–8]
3. Systemicists have defined genre more broadly, including conversational varieties of text (see Hasan 1977, for example).

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