13 The process and purpose of reading

What I want to do in this paper is to present a view of reading which I find to be consistent with my own intuition and convenient for language teaching purposes. I am not sure that I would want to claim any more for it than that. In this view, reading is seen not as a separate ability which can be investigated and taught in disassociation from other aspects of language behaviour (as it often tends to be), but as the realization of a general interpretative process which underlies all communicative activity. Furthermore, this process is seen as operating at two different levels of mental activity, the first dealing with the immediate apprehension of information and the second with the discrimination of this information into patterns of conceptual significance. I will first try to make clear what I mean by talking about reading as the use of a general interpretative process and then go on to discuss the two levels at which they seem to operate. In reference to my title, the first part of my paper, then, will deal with the process and the second, more briefly, with the purpose of reading.

Recent studies of reading have represented it as a reasoning activity whereby the reader creates meaning on the basis of textual clues. I want to suggest that this kind of creativity is not exclusive to reading but is a necessary condition for the interpretation of any discourse, written or spoken. This suggestion is not in the least original: it is one of the cardinal assumptions made by the ethnomethodologists (see Turner 1974). They argue, among other things, that meanings are derived in discourse by a process of 'practical reasoning'. Thus the interlocutors in an interaction *make* sense of what is said, they do not discover it ready made in each utterance, and the meanings that are created in this way can never be complete and explicit but only adequate to the purposes of the interaction. This view of how meanings are negotiated in discourse is consistent with Goodman's comments on the reading process:

> Reading is a selective process. It involves partial use of available minimal language cues selected from perceptual input on the basis of the reader's expectation. As this partial information is processed,

> tentative decisions are made to be confirmed, rejected, or refined as reading progresses.
> *Goodman 1967: 128.*

All I wish to add is that what Goodman is describing here is a general discourse processing strategy of which reading is simply a particular realization. It has no special status in this regard.

Certain implications arise from thus considering reading in the context of more general interpretative activities. In the first place, one is led to reconsider the nature of the text and of the reader's relationship with it. The general tendency seems to be to think of reading as *reaction*: reaction to meanings which, though explicit in the text, cannot always be fully recovered. There appears to be an assumption that it is only because of the peculiarities of the decoding operation that the total meaning contained in a text is not completely grasped. I believe that this assumption is false. I want to suggest (still following ethnomethodological line) that the *encoding* process is equally imprecise and approximate and that, therefore, there is no possibility of recovering complete meaning from a text. It is never there in the first place. The act of encoding is best thought of, I suggest, not as the formulation of messages, in principle complete and self-contained, but as the devising of a set of directions. These directions indicate to the decoder where he must look in the conceptual world of his knowledge and experience for the encoder's meaning. The encoder, then, relies on the active participation of the decoder and the decoder is successful in his comprehension to the extent that he understands the directions and is capable of carrying them out.

In this view, reading is regarded not as reaction to a text but as *interaction* between writer and reader mediated through the text. Reading is an act of participation in a discourse between interlocutors. It seems to follow from this that reading efficiency cannot be measured against the amount of information contained in a text. This is incalculable since it depends on how much knowledge the reader brings to the text and how much he wishes to extract from it. Rather, reading efficiency is a matter of how effective a discourse the reader can create from the text, either in terms of rapport with the writer or in terms of his purpose in engaging in the discourse in the first place. This latter distinction relates to the two levels of reading I mentioned earlier and which I will return to shortly.

For the moment, however, let me pursue this notion of interaction a little further. In spoken conversation, where there is an overt negotiation of meanings through reciprocal exchanges, the interaction is obvious. It is evident that the interlocutors do not piece their meanings together with careful precision or submit every utterance to analytic scrutiny. They rely on what Grice calls the 'co-operative principle' (Grice 1975) and assume

that some satisfactory agreement as to what is meant will emerge as the discourse progresses.

Sometimes precious little in the way of information needs to be exchanged for the interlocutors to be satisfied with their interaction. This is the case with 'phatic communion', where the participants in a discourse are simply concerned with maintaining their interaction without much regard to what is actually being said. But even when the exchange has a more informative purpose and where the interlocutors' interest and conceptual worlds are more seriously engaged, what is actually expressed is quite commonly vague, imprecise and insignificant; satisfactory only because it provides the interlocutors with a set of directions to where they can find and create meanings for themselves. Whether or not the meanings of encoder and decoder ever entirely coincide is something we shall never know: I would imagine it is very unlikely since such a coincidence would depend on an identity of conceptual worlds. But fortunately these do not have to coincide for communication to take place: a rough correspondence is all that is necessary. The notion that we understand other people must always be to some degree an illusion. All that we share is that highest common factor of personal meanings which is communicable by the social means of language.

I believe that written discourse, no less than spoken, must, by definition, operate in accordance with the co-operative principle. Reader and writer are engaged in an interaction in which language is used as a clue to correspondence of conceptual worlds. Unlike spoken discourse, however, written discourse is non-reciprocal and this has certain important consequences for how the interaction is realized. I suggested earlier that encoding is a matter of providing directions and decoding a matter of following them. In spoken discourse of a reciprocal kind such directions do not need to be very precisely specified by each interlocutor: they can be worked out co-operatively between them as the interaction proceeds. Consider, for example, the following exchange:

A I think there are really three creative ideas that have been central in science.
B Which are they then?
A The ideas of order, causes, and chance.
B But surely these ideas are not peculiar to science.
A That's true, but . . .
B The idea of order least of all . . .
A They have applications to science but of course they are all older than these applications.
B Right. And they are wider and deeper than the techniques of science that express them.
A Yes. They are common sense ideas.

B How do you mean?
A Well, they are all generalizations which we all make from our daily lives.
B O.K. And which we go on using to help us to run our lives.

Here the interlocutors establish between them that the expression 'central to science' does not imply 'peculiar to science' and so a particular direction is clarified. Similarly, they negotiate agreement on the expression 'common sense'. In the case of other expressions, however, there is an assumption that they indicate points of correspondence in the conceptual worlds of A and B: thus, no further specification is thought to be required for expressions like 'creative' or 'central' or 'wider and deeper'. This does not mean that A and B would necessarily agree on the meaning of these expressions if they were to be singled out for discussion but only that the two interlocutors assume agreement for the purposes of the present interaction. Later developments may prove them wrong. They might suddenly realize that their assumptions are mistaken, that they have been talking at cross-purposes because of a lack of correspondence. B might come out with a remark like:

B But I am not sure that your example shows this idea to be *creative*.
A Well, what do you mean by creative then?

But how does this co-operative principle work in written, non-reciprocal discourse? In the very act of asking a question like this I have indicated the answer. Because in putting such a question and providing it immediately with a reply, I assume the roles of both addresser and addressee. I incorporate the interaction within the encoding process itself. As I write, I make judgements about the reader's possible reactions, anticipate any difficulties that I think he might have in understanding and following my directions, conduct, in short, a covert dialogue with my supposed interlocutor. The example of spoken interaction which we have just been considering was, in fact, simply a reciprocal version of a short passage from J. Bronowski's book *The Common Sense of Science*. The non-reciprocal, written version runs as follows:

> There are three creative ideas which, each in its turn, have been central to science. They are the idea of order, the idea of causes, and the idea of chance . . . None of these ideas is peculiar to science; but all three are, of course, older least of all. They have applications to science; but all three are, of course, older than these applications. All are wider and deeper than the techniques in which science expresses. They are common sense ideas: by which I mean that they are generalizations which we all make from our daily lives, and which we go on using to help us to run our lives.
> *Bronowski 1960: 18.*

From the decoding point of view, the reader also assumes the dual role of addresser and addressee, and reconstitutes the dialogue. Rapport between writer and reader is established to the extent that the latter's possible reactions have been anticipated.

Written discourse is produced and received in detachment from an immediate context of utterance and this can easily mislead us into regarding it as a radically different mode of communication from conversation. I have represented it here as having the same underlying character. It is, in my view, a derived mode: one in which interaction, overtly reciprocal in face-to-face exchanges, is idealized into a covert cognitive process, one in which social actions, as it were, are internalized as psychological activity. The difficulties that one has in dealing with it arise from the fact that one has to abstract interaction from its concrete realization in non-reciprocal discourse, and enact a dialogue by assuming the roles of both interlocutors.

In the teaching of reading (and writing) one must, I believe, make the learner aware first of the essentially imprecise character of communication through natural language. Most of our teaching encourages learners to believe that exact meanings can, in principle, be fully recoverable from texts, that texts will yield their total content if they are scrutinized in sufficient detail. We thus discourage a normal use of natural language and deny learners access to their own conceptual world which alone ensures that reading will, in any really significant sense, be meaningful. And then, I think we should make it clear that the independence of written discourse from an immediate context does not make it any less interactive as a mode of communicating. My two versions of Bronowski suggest one way in which this might be done. Thus one might decompose a written passage into its constituent utterances and require learners to ask pertinent questions at possible points of interaction, building up dialogue sequences for later conversion into paragraphs of written language. In this way one can easily show how different paragraphs can develop from the same opening statement depending on what kind of directions are required by different interlocutors. Consider the following sequence, derived from another passage from Bronowski's book:

A The whole structure of thought in the Middle Ages is one which we find hard to grasp today.
B Why should this be so?
A The principles by which this structure was ordered seem to us now outlandish and meaningless.
B Can you give an example?
A Yes. Take the simple question: Why does an apple when it leaves the tree fall down to the ground?
B Why do you take that question in particular?

A The question had been asked often since the fourteenth century.
B Why at that time particularly?
A Because at that time the active and inquiring men of the Italian Renaissance began to take an interest in the mechanical world.
B Well, how did they answer the question?
A For answer, they went back to the works of the Greek philosophers.
B And what answer did they find?
A Well, to us, the answer smacks of the most pompous tradition of philosophy, and does less to explain the world than to shuffle it in a set of tautologies.
B Why do you say that? Come on, don't keep me in suspense!
A The Middle Ages answered the question about the apple in the tradition of Aristotle: the apple falls down and not up because it is its nature to fall down.
B Well, that does not tell us very much.
A Exactly, the answer seems quite meaningless to us these days.

This interaction can be said to underlie the actual paragraph in Bronowski, which runs as follows:

> The whole structure of thought in the Middle Ages is one which we find hard to grasp today. It was orderly structure, but the principles by which it was ordered seem to us now outlandish and meaningless. Take such a simple question as that which is said to have turned Newton's mind to the problem of gravitation: Why does an apple when it leaves the tree fall to the ground? The question had been asked often since the fourteenth century, when the active and inquiring men of the Italian Renaissance began to take an interest in the mechanical world. For answer, they went back to one of the great re-discoveries of the Arabs and the Renaissance, the works of the Greek philosophers. To us, this answer smacks of the most pompous tradition of philosophy, and does less to explain the world than to shuffle it in a set of tautologies. For the Middle Ages answered the question in the tradition of Aristotle: the apple falls down and not up because it is its nature to fall down.
> *Bronowski 1960: 26.*

This, however, is not the only possible interaction that might develop from Bronowski's opening statement. Consider the following alternative:

A The whole structure of thought in the Middle Ages is one which is hard to grasp today.
B What do you mean exactly by 'structure of thought'?
A Well, I mean the medieval way of thinking about things. It seems very strange to us in the present age.
B Can you give me an example?

A Yes, take a simple question like: Why does an apple fall to the ground when it leaves the tree?
B Because of gravitation.
A Right. That's the obvious answer for us because of Newton. But in the Middle Ages they had to look elsewhere for an answer.
B Where?
A They looked to Aristotle.
B But what did they find?
A They found the answer: The apple falls down and not up because it is its nature to fall down.

This exchange can be converted into a written discourse to yield the following paragraph:

> The whole structure of thought in the Middle Ages is one which we find hard to grasp today. The medieval way of thinking about things seems very strange to us in the present age. Consider, for example, the simple question: Why does an apple fall to the ground when it leaves the tree? Because of Newton, the answer to us is obvious: gravitation. But the Middle Ages had to look elsewhere for an answer. They turned to Aristotle, and the answer they found was: The apple falls down and not up because it is its nature to fall down.

Sufficient indication has perhaps been given of how one might approach the presentation of reading as an interactive process. I want now to turn to the question of purpose. Why, after all, do we engage in this process? What is reading *for*?

The interactive process that I have discussed so far works towards a clarification of what I have called directions for discovering where meaning is to be found. In the case we have just been considering, for example, the development of the paragraph can be seen as a means of ensuring that the reader will accept the truth of the opening statement and incorporate it within his conceptual world. The additional information that Bronowski provides to clarify and illustrate (adopting the dual role of addresser and addressee) has an essentially *facilitating* function. In reading we apprehend this information in the process of immediate interaction but then, once its function has been fulfilled, we allow it to recede into the background. At one level, then, reading is a matter of immediate apprehension through interaction, but this procedure serves only to provide a more accurate specification of directions to meaning. At a more discriminating level, the reader sorts out what is merely facilitating from what he wishes to accept as a permanent addition to his world of knowledge and experience. This, I suggest, is his real purpose in reading: not simply to engage in an interaction but to derive from this interaction

something which sustains or extends his conceptual world. At the immediate apprehending level reading, we may say, is a heuristic procedure. At the discriminating level it is an epistemological one.

Which information is simply apprehended for temporary use and which is singled out as significant at a more discriminating level will, of course, depend to a considerable degree on what the reader already knows and what he wants to find out in his reading. If the interaction is successful, so that there is close rapport between writer and reader, then there will be agreement on relative significance. But it is always possible for the reader to impose his own weighting on the information he receives. He may then be accused of missing the point or taking remarks out of context. As I pointed out earlier, since conceptual worlds do not coincide, there can never be an exact congruence of encoder's and decoder's meanings. Communication can of its nature only be approximate.

At the same time, of course, communication could not take place at all if text could not be realized as discourse which set conceptual worlds in correspondence. And description of discourse structure would be impossible.

Conclusions that rhetoricians (both ancient and modern) and common readers arrive at about the way discourse is structured are based on an assumption that encoder and decoder can agree on relative significance, on which items of information are to be epistemologically salient, and which are intended to provide heuristic support.

Turning now to pedagogic matters, it seems to me that the distinction that I have been trying to make here is rarely taken into account in the design of reading materials. Comprehension questions, for example, commonly require the learner to rummage around in the text for information in a totally indiscriminate way, without regard to what purpose might be served in so doing. Learners are seldom required to use the information they acquire, either within an interaction process to facilitate access to the most salient directions towards meaning or to follow these directions into their own conceptual worlds. Reading is thus represented as an end in itself, an activity that has no relevance to real knowledge and experience and therefore no real meaning.

The situation could be improved, I suggest, by making the learners aware, through participation in the kind of interactive exercises I proposed earlier, of how much written discourse serves an essentially facilitating function, of how much of it therefore, once this function has been discharged, can then be ignored. We should try to encourage learners to relate what they read to their own world of knowledge and experience. We can do this, in part, by selecting reading material that is likely to appeal to their interests, but there is no point in doing this unless we also ensure that their interests are actually engaged by allowing them the same latitude of interpretation that we as practised readers permit

ourselves. The texts have to be converted into discourse and the language put to creative use.

I have tried, on the odd occasion, to answer comprehension questions of the kind that are current in language teaching textbooks (and that I have been responsible for producing myself from time to time) and have found the experience a chastening one. I perform very badly indeed. This must be either because I do not know how to read properly, which I am reluctant to admit, or because the questions are just not relevant to proper reading, because they do not involve the learner in the necessary process of interaction which provides the heuristic means to an epistemological purpose. The second is, I think, the more likely explanation.

Notes

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