

9 Types of linguistic sign in texts

In this paper I want to try to get at an understanding of what is involved in the use of language in texts by reconsidering the nature of the linguistic sign. And I want also to try to draw out what implications such an understanding might have for language teaching pedagogy.

My first move is to ask the basic question: What *is* a text? De Beaugrande and Dressler in their recent *Introduction to Text Linguistics* (de Beaugrande and Dressler 1981) define it as a 'communicative occurrence'. But I do not see that it can be an occurrence since it has no dynamism of its own but can only be activated by human agency. It does not itself communicate but provides the means whereby communication can be achieved. Indeed, de Beaugrande and Dressler would, in spite of their definition, appear to agree, since they point out that of the seven constitutive conditions of textual communication (*viz.*: cohesion, coherence, intentionality, acceptability, informativity, situationality, intertextuality) five are user centred and have to do not with the text itself but with its use in interaction. Texts, I would suggest then, do not communicate: people communicate by using texts as a device for mediating a discourse process. It is this process which is the communicative occurrence. Texts as such are simply a static configuration of linguistic signs which have to be interpreted in a particular way if they are to serve their mediating purpose.

This may seem like a quibble. But it seems to me that if this point is not made clear, there is a danger that we might suppose that text signals its own meaning, like the sentence. Certainly in language teaching there has been a tendency to make this supposition. Learners have been led to believe that there is a complete and single meaning in reading passages immanent in the language itself and recoverable by a

close scrutiny of the text, and recourse to the dictionary where necessary.

Texts do not signal their own meaning as sentences do. But why not? They apparently use the same set of linguistic signs. Here, for example, are three sentences extracted from a text:

Popular colours were white and green.

They don't seem to care for the taste.

Mahogany was still expensive.

Presented like this with three separate sentences, you have no difficulty assigning meaning to each by simply engaging a knowledge of the syntax and semantics of English. You know what the word *colour* denotes and you know that it has a superordinate sense relation to the two hyponyms *white* and *green*. You know that past tense denotes past time and that it contracts a sense relation with other terms in the tense system of English, so you know that:

Popular colours were white and green.

has a different meaning from:

Popular colours *are* white and green.

And so with the other sentences. *They* denotes plural entities and is a term in the pronoun system, thereby contrasting in sense with *you*, *we*, *I*. You know the denotation of the lexemes *care for*, *taste*, and so on. So you have no difficulty with the meaning of:

They don't seem to care for the taste.

You know then what each of these sentences means as a combination of linguistic signs and you could produce a German translation if called upon to do so. So the meaning of these sentences is not a matter of dispute: it can be assigned quite simply by invoking a knowledge of the language system of English. And that meaning will, of its nature, be complete and fixed: it admits of no variation. But now suppose that I present these expressions to you not as sentences but as elements of text, as utterances, intending to mediate a common understanding between us. In this case, although you may quite legitimately claim that you know what the sentences mean, you do not have the slightest idea what I am talking about.

Popular colours were white and green.

Popular with whom, when exactly, and colours of what—paint, flowers, socks: it could be almost anything. Obviously in offering you this textual fragment I am failing dismally to conform to the Gricean co-operative principle (Grice 1975). My remark is uninformative and irrelevant. And the same of course is true of the other expressions. The textual elements fail to mediate. There is no communicative occurrence. Since the expressions could mean almost anything, they are virtually meaningless.

And yet the signs and their manner of combination would appear to be identical, in each case, whether they are construed as sentence or utterance. But appearances are deceptive. It is obvious that the linguistic sign in the sentence has a quite different mode of meaning from that in the text. Indeed, I want to suggest that it is a different kind of sign. In the sentence, the sign is a *symbol* which by virtue of its place as a term in the linguistic system contracts internal sense relations with other symbols and relates to the external world by the denotation of abstract types, or general classes of entities. In the text, on the other hand, the sign has to be interpreted as what I will call an *index* (cf. Lyons 1977b: 99–109). Its function is to indicate or point to where meaning is to be found beyond itself, and this meaning is achieved by the language user in following the directions which are indicated. Symbolic meaning is *virtual* and the concern of semantics. Indexical meaning is *actual* and the concern of pragmatics (cf. Cicourel on ‘Indexical Expressions’ in Cicourel 1973: 56, 87–8).

The receiver of a text, then, uses the sign as an index to refer him to areas of his own non-linguistic knowledge which may have been acquired before his encounter with the text or in the course of processing it. The sender of the text has the task of calculating how much information he needs to provide so that it meets the indexical needs of his interlocutor. If he provides too much, he will be accused of prolixity (‘Yes, yes, I know; all right, I’ve got the point’). If he provides too little he will be accused of obscurity or even deliberate obfuscation (‘What are you on about? I’m sorry, I don’t quite follow . . .’).

In reciprocal discourse, as in conversation, interlocutors can, of course, overtly negotiate the convergence of knowledge to achieve the congruence of intention and interpretation necessary for the purpose of their interaction. In non-reciprocal

discourse, however, in which readers and writers are engaged, or, for that matter, in which speakers address an attentive audience, the sole begetter of the text has to continually shift his perspective, take turns on behalf of his interlocutors and anticipate reaction, make assumptions about shared knowledge. This kind of vicarious discourse enactment is a tricky business. Life, however, is easier for the receiver of non-reciprocal discourse than for the interlocutor in reciprocal discourse because he is involved by engagement without participation. Not being responsible for textualizing the discourse, he can control the extent of this engagement in relation to his purpose or his interest. He can, if he wishes, skim the page, or switch off his attention to what the lecturer is saying and think of other things, or even go to sleep.

I shall return to this matter of participation and engagement a little later. For the moment I want to dwell a little on the question of knowledge, that elusive abstraction which passes between interlocutors through the mediation of the text. To avoid getting into the tangles of epistemology, we may cut a Gordian knot or two and say that knowledge is a set of cognitive constructs derived from experience, abstracted from particular instances. Its most obvious embodiment is the system of symbols in natural language and the rules for their combination. The linguistic symbol represents an abstract category of actual and particular instances. So it is that you know what a sentence means as an isolated string of symbols. But I want to suggest that knowledge also operates to organize experience at another and less analytic level, at the level of context as well as code, of the schema as well as the system. Consider, for example, this expression, presented this time as an utterance, an extract of text:

She does not take care of her nails.

We assume that what are being referred to here are *fingernails*. But why should we make such an assumption? Why does the expression not invoke with equal force the image of a female carpenter being reproached for not looking after the tools of her trade? There is nothing whatever in our systemic knowledge of symbolic meanings which constrains us to prefer the first interpretation rather than the second. So why do we associate nails with fingers and not with hammers in this expression?

We do so because we interpret the signs as being indexical of what we know to be a normal frame of reference. In our society,

though not necessarily in others, female carpenters are uncommon, and so although there is nothing intrinsically wrong with the concept, it just does not enter into our customary scheme of things. It is this awareness of what is customary that I refer to as contextual or schematic knowledge: the knowledge we have of the accepted attitudes, beliefs, and practices which define what is normal, established, conventional, what are the standard patterns of experience. When we interpret a text we do so by recognizing that the linguistic signs are indexical of a particular pattern, a particular schema. So to understand the utterances in texts, to realize meaning in language use, we need to engage schematic as well as systemic knowledge. It is not enough to know the general symbolic meaning of signs, we need to discover their particular indexical meaning as well in actual contexts of occurrence. The interpretation of text is a matter of taking bearings from both systemic and schematic knowledge so as to achieve the indexical value of the signs.

With this in mind, let us return to the three expressions that I quoted earlier. Restored to its context, the first now appears as follows:

Quite a lot of furniture was completely painted. Popular colours were white and green, picked out in gold. Adam's earlier style also included pieces elaborately carved and gilded all over.

The frame of reference is established as that of antique furniture. We are now able to realize the indexical value of *colours* as having reference to paint. We may not have sufficient schematic knowledge of antique furniture to be able to realize a specific indexical value for the past tense, but for those who do have such knowledge the reference to Adam would afford the necessary indication. Notice, too, that we can assign an appropriate indexical value to the word *pieces* as referring to pieces of furniture rather than, let us say, to pieces of sculpture or music.

The other expressions I cited earlier come from the same passage and we can make indexical sense of them in a similar way by relating them to the frame of reference projected by the text. In the case of the third expression, the association is straightforward:

Mahogany was still expensive.

And contextualization now does enable us to realize the time reference. The passage continues as follows:

Beech was the wood most usually used for furniture intended to be entirely coated with paint or gilt. It was also used as a cheaper substitute for satinwood, especially for legs. It is a good, close-grained timber, but very prone to attack by woodworm. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, it was general practice to construct the frame of chair seats in beech and veneer them with mahogany. Mahogany was still expensive, although the heavy duty formerly imposed on its importation had been mitigated in 1747.

But what now of the third expression:

They don't seem to care for the taste.

It is not easy to imagine how this might fit into the schematic frame that the passage develops. And yet it does with no difficulty, as follows:

This economizing on seat frames (i.e. making them of beech rather than mahogany) has had unfortunate results for us today. Mahogany is not much liked by woodworm. They don't seem to care for the taste, preferring a savoury morsel of walnut, elm, oak, pine, or beech.¹

So what I am trying to demonstrate is the way that the writer exploits systemic knowledge, which he assumes to be shared by his supposed interlocutor, to project his schematic knowledge into text. He thereby converts linguistic symbols of fixed denotation into indices whose appropriate reference the reader has to realize in order to recreate the schemata in question. The writer assumes that there will be common ground to build upon, that the reader he has in mind will have some schematic knowledge of the furniture frame of reference, and will co-operate in the approved Gricean fashion by engaging it. The purpose of the interaction thus mediated through the text is to extend or elaborate this frame by bringing reader and writer knowledge into convergence.

The model of the communication process that I am trying to construct, then, looks like this. Interlocutors inhabit different individual worlds of knowledge and experience, but there are elements in common which provide the means of connection. One set of such shared elements is the language system and

another is the collection of cultural patterns of normal practice and thought, what I have referred to as schematic knowledge. Communication is achieved when these elements are exploited to bring the different worlds into convergence, thus, for the interlocutors, extending the common ground of shared knowledge. This convergence is brought about by means of indexical realization whereby the language user computes the meaning of signs in texts by taking bearings on systemic and schematic knowledge. This taking of bearings is what the ethnomethodologists refer to as interpretative procedures (see Cicourel 1973). These procedures essentially involve the conversion of symbols into indices. If they are not engaged, then the text does not mediate and no communication takes place.

I want to turn now to pedagogic matters. I assume that to learn a language, in the sense of learning how to *use* a language effectively for purposes of communication, must entail the ability to use texts to mediate a transfer of information in the way I have outlined. This information may be essentially ideational in character and have to do with the propositional content, it may be essentially interpersonal and have to do with illocutionary intent. But in both cases, the conveyance of information brings about a change of state whereby two worlds of knowledge in varying degrees of correspondence are brought into whatever state of convergence is required of the interlocutors. I have argued that for this process of conveyance and convergence to take place, the interlocutors need to engage interpretative procedures whereby they plot meaning, as it were, by taking bearings on both systemic and schematic knowledge. The question now arises as to what kinds of texts are most likely to promote this necessary procedural ability in the learners.

First let us note, as I indicated earlier, that although all text is the trace of discourse interactivity, this interactivity may be realized overtly and reciprocally, as in face to face interaction where meanings can be jointly negotiated and where text is produced by direct participation; or interactivity may have to be realized covertly and non-reciprocally, where one interlocutor is in charge of constructing the text and the other is engaged as a non-participant, having to react, as it were, without responding and without being able to influence the development of the discourse. Let us call texts which are the immediate by-product of reciprocal interaction *participant* texts and those which call for non-reciprocal engagement *non-participant* texts.

The creation of participant texts in the classroom is not at all easy to achieve and we should be wary of counterfeits. The provision of formally appropriate responses to given cues, for example, does not produce text in the sense I have been using this term. In an exercise in a textbook currently in use in Germany, for example, learners are asked to study what are described as 'short conversations' and then to make up similar so-called conversations of their own. Examples:

Is the oil polluting the river now?

Yes, it is. It pollutes it all the time.

Is the government inspector visiting the factory now?

No, he isn't. He doesn't often visit the factory.

The activity here is directed at the teaching of systemic knowledge and not at the procedural exploitation of such knowledge to achieve meaning through text. These are pairs of spoken sentences and not conversation. Again, the familiar specimen dialogue associated with situations like the theatre, the post office, the railway station will generally be pseudo-text to the extent that it is non-negotiable. The learners are provided with ready-made correlations between system and schema so that no procedural work is required to achieve indexical value. In neither case do learners take any part in a discourse process so they make no contribution to a developing text: they simply follow a pseudo-textual script prepared in advance. This is not to say that sentence-pairs and specimen dialogues do not have a role to play in the teaching of language. Clearly they do, and an important one at that. But they do not constitute participant text. They do not involve the learner in the negotiation of indexical meaning. Nor do they involve him in what we might call the discourse management aspects of reciprocal interaction, in the recognition and use of linguistic signs not as indices of meaning but as *signals* of interactive function, which indicate that the interlocutor is bidding for a turn at talk, or shifting to another topic, or closing his contribution, and so on. So although exercises with pseudo-texts have their value in teaching language system, learners need to be involved in other activities as well as these, which will afford them the opportunity to participate in realizing the system as a communicative resource, and so to learn the use of indices in interpretation and signals in interaction. Such activities are difficult to devise because they have to create situations

which call for negotiated settlement and which are based on some purpose which the learners will accept as worthwhile and warranting the interactive effort. The activities are, of course, intended to have a language learning *effect*, and it will often be necessary to ensure that they do by tactful teaching, but their *purpose* must carry conviction in its own right independently of this effect. Not otherwise is the learner likely to negotiate a satisfactory outcome through participant text.

The question of purpose arises too, of course, with non-participant text, but there it creates a problem of a rather different order. The text that results from reciprocal exchanges is, as I have said, jointly produced as a concomitant output from the discourse process itself. It is a co-operative enterprise which naturally constrains the interlocutors towards a common purpose. They do not always find it easy of course: they may indeed find themselves, as we say, at *cross* purposes. If they do they may try to repair the fault or if that fails they may make a schematic shift to another frame of reference where convergence is easier to achieve. So interlocutors may give up their discussion on existentialism or God and talk instead about the weather. If we find ourselves 'worlds apart' or 'not talking the same language' or 'not getting our message across'—all expressions which refer to the failure to meet the participant purpose of what Cicourel calls 'reciprocity of perspectives'—then in this event, we withdraw from this particular interaction and go and find somebody else to talk to.

Now in non-reciprocal interaction the text is entirely controlled by one interlocutor. He has his own purposes and he proceeds on the assumption that his addressee will accept them as his own. This enables him to enact a covert discourse, taking on the role of the addressee vicariously by a kind of unauthorized proxy, and supposing that the addressee will co-operate on his terms, and match interpretation with intention. But since non-participant text does not require co-operation in its production, it cannot compel us to co-operate in its reception. We engage with it on our own terms. If we choose to be submissive, then we can indeed fall in with the text producer's plans, and allow his purpose to prevail. But we may choose to be assertive and to impose our own purpose on the text, drawing out from it what want or need, and skimming over the rest. One can of course vary attention in this way during participation as well, one can 'switch off' during a conversation, but then control of the

interaction is diminished. But with varying attention in the engagement with non-participant text, control is increased.

Now I want to suggest that the difference between submissive and assertive engagement can be related to Piaget's distinction between accommodation and assimilation (e.g. Piaget 1952). Submission typically occurs when there is considerable disparity between the schematic knowledge of the interlocutors and when the addressee is impelled for one reason or another to modify the structure of his knowledge so as to accommodate that of the text producer. Convergence is then, as it were, addresser controlled and its achievement naturally makes particular demands on what I have called the procedural ability to realize indexical meaning. Assertion, on the other hand, typically occurs when there is considerable overlap between initial states of schematic knowledge, so that new information can be readily assimilated into the receiver's existing conceptual categories. Convergence then is addressee controlled, and its achievement calls for less exertion of the procedural ability.

This is, no doubt, too neat, too simple, an altogether too speculative scheme, but let me presume on your submissive engagement with my present text and point out that what I have said, if valid, creates a pedagogic dilemma in the use of texts for teaching language.

Most of our processing of non-participant text is, I would suppose, of an assertive kind. We generally read, for example, about things we are familiar with and what is prepared for us by the agents of mass media is designed to be easy to assimilate into our customary categories of reality, easy to fit into the slots of our schematic knowledge. So if we want learners to approximate to normal or 'authentic' behaviour in their use of a foreign language, we should presumably encourage them to process text assertively. But then if they do they will not be effectively using text to develop their procedural ability, which is, paradoxically, most actively engaged by submission, when the text records information which is not familiar and which has to be interpreted by schematic accommodation. If, however, one then chooses texts which are schematically remote from the learners' knowledge, on the grounds that they will encourage the learning of procedures, one runs the serious risk of undermining motivation since such texts will tend not to relate to the learners' interests or practical concerns.

This dilemma must be faced up to in any discussion about the

use of texts in language teaching: indeed, I think it lies at the very heart of language teaching pedagogy in general. It cannot be simply solved, as some people would seem to imply, by appeal to the notion of authenticity. Certainly *I* cannot claim to have found a solution. But what I would like to do, still counting on your submission, is to let loose a hare which I think might just be worth chasing.

There is a kind of text, of an intrinsically non-participant kind, which its producer uses to create schemata which are not intended to be conceptual structures of conventional reality and cannot therefore in principle be conveyed intact to the receiver but must always be subject to some interpretative accommodation. I refer to literary texts, and in particular to lyric poetry. Here the linguistic signs do not strictly speaking refer, since there is no established schema to refer to. Rather they represent a unique patterning of reality and take on the character of yet another kind of sign: the *icon*. The mode of meaning in literature is, I think, essentially not one of indexical reference but of iconic representation, and its realization depends upon an understanding of how the systemic resources of the language are exploited to create unconventional schematic configurations. Such an understanding must obviously place a heavy reliance on procedural work. And yet since these represented schemata of literature do bear a resemblance to the schemata of normal knowledge referred to by means of conventional text, they are not remote from the experience of the receiver and so although there can never be convergence, there can be, and must be, a basis for comparison. Literature, like myth, creates an alternative, counter-reality by the reformulation of the familiar. What is represented must be recognized as a version of the world of conventional reference.

This then is the hare I want to let loose among you. It may be that by a judicious use of literary texts alongside conventional ones we may resolve the dilemma I mentioned and help learners towards the procedural ability they need to be effective users of the language they are learning. But even if it turns out that the hare is too elusive to capture, the chase may lead us through terrain that is well worth exploring.

But meanwhile, let me review, in summary, the terrain that I have been travelling, rather errantly, in this paper. Texts are used to mediate interaction whereby two worlds are brought into convergence. This mediation cannot be achieved simply by issuing

tokens of linguistic symbols: to do this is only to demonstrate systemic knowledge. It can only be achieved by interpretative procedures which establish correspondences between systemic and schematic knowledge and thereby convert symbols (which denote) into indices (which refer). Communication is thus achieved through text by a realization of indexical value. When the states of schematic knowledge of two interlocutors are initially in close correspondence, then the need for procedural work is diminished, since indexical realization is relatively easy to achieve. Conversely, when schematic states are far apart, considerable demands are made on procedural negotiation to bring them together. There is a problem for pedagogy here. If we want to develop procedural ability in the learner, then it would seem logical to do so through texts which are schematically remote, but then the learner is likely to be less disposed to engage with the texts since by the same token they are also likely to be remote from his interests and purposes. In view of this, it might be worth considering using texts in which signs functioned not as indices referring to conventional schemata, but as icons which represented schemata which, though comparable with familiar patterns of reality, are unique and need to be procedurally created. This was my hare. Apart from the symbol, index, and icon, I mentioned a fourth type of sign: the signal. This is used in the business of maintaining or managing the interactivity itself, of organizing the actual participation or engagement in the discourse process. Signals indicate shifts of speaker turn, changes of topic, and so on: they organize the immediate conveyancing of information and intent. Knowing how to use them is a matter of interactive rather than interpretative procedure.

Traditionally, language teaching has focused attention on the linguistic sign as symbol, on the development of systemic knowledge. This, as I have tried to indicate, is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for the understanding of language in use. If learners are to acquire the ability to achieve meaning through the language they are learning, then a further condition has to be met. They need to be engaged with texts, whether they participate or not, so as to mediate purposeful interaction. They need, in other words, to develop interpretative and interactive procedures for the realization of the indexical and signalling functions of linguistic signs in texts.

Notes

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1 Extract from Philp (1962).