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1

Introduction: linguistic forms and functions

1.1 The functions of language

The analysis of **discourse** is, necessarily, the analysis of language in use. As such, it cannot be restricted to the description of linguistic forms independent of the purposes or functions which those forms are designed to serve in human affairs. While some linguists may concentrate on determining the formal properties of a language, the discourse analyst is committed to an investigation of what that language is used for. While the formal approach has a long tradition, manifested in innumerable volumes of grammar, the functional approach is less well documented. Attempts to provide even a general set of labels for the principal functions of language have resulted in vague, and often confusing, terminology. We will adopt only two terms to describe the major functions of language and emphasise that this division is an analytic convenience. It would be unlikely that, on any occasion, a natural language utterance would be used to fulfil only one function, to the total exclusion of the other. That function which language serves in the expression of 'content' we will describe as **transactional**, and that function involved in expressing social relations and personal attitudes we will describe as **interactional**. Our distinction, 'transactional / interactional', stands in general correspondence to the functional dichotomies – 'representative / expressive', found in Bühler (1934), 'referential / emotive' (Jakobson, 1960), 'ideational / interpersonal' (Halliday, 1970b) and 'descriptive / social-expressive' (Lyons, 1977).

1.1.1 *The transactional view*

Linguists and linguistic philosophers tend to adopt a limited approach to the functions of language in society. While they

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frequently acknowledge that language may be used to perform many communicative functions, they nonetheless make the general assumption that the most important function is the communication of information. Thus Lyons (1977: 32) observes that the notion of communication is readily used 'of feelings, moods and attitudes' but suggests that he will be primarily interested in 'the intentional transmission of factual, or propositional, information'. Similarly Bennett (1976: 5) remarks 'it seems likely that communication is primarily a matter of a speaker's seeking either to inform a hearer of something or to enjoin some action upon him'.

The value of the use of language to transmit information is well embedded in our cultural mythology. We all believe that it is the faculty of language which has enabled the human race to develop diverse cultures, each with its distinctive social customs, religious observances, laws, oral traditions, patterns of trading, and so on. We all believe, moreover, that it is the acquisition of written language which has permitted the development within some of these cultures of philosophy, science and literature (see Goody, 1977). We all believe that this development is made possible by the ability to transfer information through the use of language, which enables man to utilise the knowledge of his forebears, and the knowledge of other men in other cultures.

We shall call the language which is used to convey 'factual or propositional information' *primarily transactional language*. In primarily transactional language we assume that what the speaker (or writer) has primarily in mind is the efficient transference of information. Language used in such a situation is primarily 'message oriented'. It is important that the recipient gets the informative detail correct. Thus if a policeman gives directions to a traveller, a doctor tells a nurse how to administer medicine to a patient, a householder puts in an insurance claim, a shop assistant explains the relative merits of two types of knitting wool, or a scientist describes an experiment, in each case it matters that the speaker should make what he says (or writes) clear. There will be unfortunate (even disastrous) consequences in the real world if the message is not properly understood by the recipient.

1.1.2 *The interactional view*

Whereas linguists, philosophers of language and psycho-

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linguists have, in general, paid particular attention to the use of language for the transmission of 'factual or propositional information', sociologists and sociolinguists have been particularly concerned with the use of language to establish and maintain social relationships. In sociological and anthropological literature the *phatic* use of language has been frequently commented on – particularly the conventional use of language to open talk-exchanges and to close them. Conversational analysts have been particularly concerned with the use of language to negotiate role-relationships, peer-solidarity, the exchange of turns in a conversation, the saving of face of both speaker and hearer (cf. Labov, 1972a; Brown and Levinson, 1978; Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson, 1974; Lakoff, 1973). It is clearly the case that a great deal of everyday human interaction is characterised by the primarily interpersonal rather than the primarily transactional use of language. When two strangers are standing shivering at a bus-stop in an icy wind and one turns to the other and says 'My goodness, it's cold', it is difficult to suppose that the primary intention of the speaker is to convey information. It seems much more reasonable to suggest that the speaker is indicating a readiness to be friendly and to talk. Indeed a great deal of ordinary everyday conversation appears to consist of one individual commenting on something which is present to both him and his listener. The weather is of course the most quoted example of this in British English. However a great deal of casual conversation contains phrases and echoes of phrases which appear more to be intended as contributions to a conversation than to be taken as instances of information-giving. Thus a woman on a bus describing the way a mutual friend has been behaving, getting out of bed too soon after an operation, concludes her turn in the conversation by saying:

Aye, she's an awfy woman. (awfy = Sc awful)

This might be taken as an informative summary. Her neighbour then says reflectively (having been supportively uttering *aye*, *aye* throughout the first speaker's turn):

Aye, she's an awfy woman.

Pirsig (1976: 313) remarks of such a conversation: 'the conversation's pace intrigues me. It isn't intended to go anywhere, just fill

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the time of day . . . on and on and on with no point or purpose other than to fill the time, like the rocking of a chair.'

What seems to be primarily at issue here is the sharing of a common point of view. Brown & Levinson point out the importance for social relationships of establishing common ground and agreeing on points of view, and illustrate the lengths to which speakers in different cultures will go to maintain an appearance of agreement, and they remark 'agreement may also be stressed by *repeating* part or all of what the preceding speaker has said' (1978: 117).

Whereas, as we shall note, written language is, in general, used for primarily transactional purposes, it is possible to find written genres whose purpose is not primarily to inform but to maintain social relationships – 'thank you' letters, love letters, games of consequences, etc.

1.2 Spoken and written language

1.2.1 *Manner of production*

From the point of view of production, it is clear that spoken and written language make somewhat different demands on language-producers. The speaker has available to him the full range of 'voice quality' effects (as well as facial expression, postural and gestural systems). Armed with these he can always override the effect of the words he speaks. Thus the speaker who says 'I'd really like to', leaning forward, smiling, with a 'warm, breathy' voice quality, is much more likely to be interpreted as meaning what he says, than another speaker uttering the same words, leaning away, brow puckered, with a 'sneering, nasal' voice quality. These paralinguistic cues are denied to the writer. We shall generally ignore paralinguistic features in spoken language in this book since the data we shall quote from is spoken by co-operative adults who are not exploiting paralinguistic resources against the verbal meanings of their utterances but are, rather, using them to reinforce the meaning.

Not only is the speaker controlling the production of communicative systems which are different from those controlled by the writer, he is also processing that production under circumstances which are considerably more demanding. The speaker must monitor what it is that he has just said, and determine whether it

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matches his intentions, while he is uttering his current phrase and monitoring that, and simultaneously planning his next utterance and fitting that into the overall pattern of what he wants to say and monitoring, moreover, not only his own performance but its reception by his hearer. He has no permanent record of what he has said earlier, and only under unusual circumstances does he have notes which remind him what he wants to say next.

The writer, on the contrary, may look over what he has already written, pause between each word with no fear of his interlocutor interrupting him, take his time in choosing a particular word, even looking it up in the dictionary if necessary, check his progress with his notes, reorder what he has written, and even change his mind about what he wants to say. Whereas the speaker is under considerable pressure to keep on talking during the period allotted to him, the writer is characteristically under no such pressure. Whereas the speaker knows that any words which pass his lips will be heard by his interlocutor and, if they are not what he intends, he will have to undertake active, public 'repair', the writer can cross out and rewrite in the privacy of his study.

There are, of course, advantages for the speaker. He can observe his interlocutor and, if he wishes to, modify what he is saying to make it more accessible or acceptable to his hearer. The writer has no access to immediate feedback and simply has to imagine the reader's reaction. It is interesting to observe the behaviour of individuals when given a choice of conducting a piece of business in person or in writing. Under some circumstances a face-to-face interaction is preferred but, in others, for a variety of different reasons, the individual may prefer to conduct his transaction in writing. Whereas in a spoken interaction the speaker has the advantage of being able to monitor his listener's minute-by-minute reaction to what he says, he also suffers from the disadvantage of exposing his own feelings ('leaking'; Ekman & Friesen, 1969) and of having to speak clearly and concisely and make immediate response to whichever way his interlocutor reacts.

1.2.2 *The representation of discourse: texts*

So far we have considered in very general terms some of the differences in the manner of production of writing and speech. Before we go on to discuss some of the ways in which the forms of

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speech and writing differ, we shall consider, in the next two sections, some of the problems of representing written and spoken language. We shall place this within a general discussion of what it means to represent 'a text'. We shall use **text** as a technical term, to refer to the verbal record of a communicative act. (For another approach to text cf. discussion in Chapter 6.)

1.2.3 *Written texts*

The notion of 'text' as a printed record is familiar in the study of literature. A 'text' may be differently presented in different editions, with different type-face, on different sizes of paper, in one or two columns, and we still assume, from one edition to the next, that the different presentations all represent the same 'text'. It is important to consider just what it is that is 'the same'. Minimally, the words should be the same words, presented in the same order. Where there are disputed readings of texts, editors usually feel obliged to comment on the crux; so of Hamlet's

> O, that this too too sullied flesh would melt
>
> (1.ii.129)

Dover Wilson makes it clear that this is an interpretation, since the second Quarto gives 'too too sallied' and the first Folio 'too too solid' (Dover Wilson, 1934). Even where there is no doubt about the identity of words and their correct sequence, replicating these alone does not guarantee an adequate representation of a text. Consider the following extract of dialogue from *Pride and Prejudice:*

> 'Mr. Bennet, how can you abuse your own children in such a way? You take delight in vexing me. You have no compassion on my poor nerves.'
>
> 'You mistake me, my dear. I have a high respect for your nerves. They are my old friends. I have heard you mention them with consideration these twenty years at least.'

It is clear that more than simply reproducing the words in their correct order is required. It is necessary to replicate punctuation conventions, as well as the lineation which indicates the change of speaker. The extract reads as gobbledygook if it is read as a speech by one individual. An adequate representation of a text must assign speeches to the correct characters, sentences to the correct para-

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graphs, and paragraphs to the correct chapters. The author's organisation and staging of his work must be preserved.

In a piece of expository prose, the author's indication of the development of the argument contributes to the reader's experience of the text. Thus titles, chapter headings, sub-divisions and sub-headings all indicate to the reader how the author intends his argument to be chunked. The detail of lineation rarely matters in expository or descriptive prose. However it clearly becomes crucial in the reproduction of poetry. The work of those seventeenth-century poets who created poems in the shape of diamonds or butterflies would be largely incomprehensible if the form were not preserved.

The notion of 'text' reaches beyond the reproduction of printed material in some further printed form. A letter, handwritten in purple ink with many curlicues, may have its text reproduced in printed form. Similarly, neutral printed versions may be produced of handwritten shopping lists, slogans spray-painted on to hoardings, and public notices embossed on metal plates. In each case the 'text' will be held to have been reproduced if the words, the punctuation and, where relevant, the lineation are reproduced accurately.

Where the original text exploits typographical variety, a text reproduced in one type-face may lack some of the quality of the original. An obvious example is a newspaper item which may exploit several different type-faces, different sizes of type and a particular shape of lay-out. It is interesting to observe that publishers regularly reproduce conscious manipulation of the written medium on the part of the writer. Thus Jane Austen's expression of contrast is reproduced by publishers in italics:

> 'Nay,' said Elizabeth, 'this is not fair. *You* wish to think all the world respectable, and are hurt if I speak ill of any body. *I* only want to think you *perfect* . . .'

Similarly Queen Victoria's use of underlining in her handwritten journal is represented by her publishers in the printed version with an italic type-face to represent the emphasis she wishes to indicate when writing of Lord Melbourne:

> he gave me *such* a kind, and I may say, *fatherly* look
> (Thursday, 28 June 1838)

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Where the writer is deliberately exploiting the resources of the written medium, it seems reasonable to suggest that that manipulation constitutes part of the text.

A further illustration of this is to be found in the conventions governing spelling. In general we assume that words have a standardised spelling in British English. The fact of the standardisation enables authors to manipulate idiosyncratic spelling to achieve special effects. Thus in *Winnie-the-Pooh* the publishers reproduce the notice outside Owl's house in one inset line, using capitals, and with the author's own spelling:

PLEZ CNOKE IF AN RNSR IS NOT REQID

The point that the author makes with this particular spelling would be lost if the words were reproduced in their standard form. It might then be claimed that such a form of the text was incomplete or inadequate, because the point which the author wishes to make is no longer accessible from the written text. Indeed the importance of the correct citing of an author's spelling is regularly marked by the insertion of *sic* into a citation by a second author who wishes to disclaim responsibility for an aberrant spelling.

We have so far been making the simplifying assumption that it is clear, in all cases, what the original text consists of. Where handwritten texts are at issue, it is often the case that the individual reproducing the text in a printed version has to make a considerable effort of interpretation to assign a value to some of the less legible words. In literature, as we have remarked already, uncertainty may give rise to cruces, to disputed texts. In letters, prescriptions, shopping lists, school essays, the reader normally pushes through a once-for-all interpretation of a text which may never be read again. It must be clear however, that a printed version of a handwritten text is, in an important sense, an interpretation. This is particularly clear in the handwritten attempts of very young children where the adult is obliged to assign each large painstakingly formed letter token to a particular type of letter, which he may then re-interpret in the light of the larger message. Thus we have before us a page with a drawing of a large animal (reported to be a lion) and a table with a goldfish bowl on it. The five-year-old writes below what might be transliterated as:

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1. the lion wos the fish to ti it

2. the cat wants to get dwon the steis

3. with qwt to dsthhb thelion

A possible *interpretation* of the text thus represented might be:

> The lion wants the fish, to eat it. The cat wants to get down the stairs without to disturb the lion.

The transliteration of the original with *qwt*, in line 3, reasonably accurately represents the first letter (which might also be represented as a figure nine if nine has a straight back stroke). A more charitable and *interpretive* transliteration would render it as *a* (i.e. 'unhatted' *a* with a long backstroke (ɑ). We shall return to the problem of the interpretive work of the reader / listener in identifying the words which constitute the text, in the next section.

1.2.4 *Spoken texts*

The problems encountered with the notion of 'text' as the verbal record of a communicative act become a good deal more complex when we consider what is meant by spoken 'text'. The simplest view to assume is that a tape-recording of a communicative act will preserve the 'text'. The tape-recording may also preserve a good deal that may be extraneous to the text – coughing, chairs creaking, buses going past, the scratch of a match lighting a cigarette. We shall insist that these events do not constitute part of the text (though they may form part of the relevant context, cf. Chapter 2).

In general the discourse analyst works with a tape-recording of an event, from which he then makes a written transcription, annotated according to his interests on a particular occasion – transcriptions of the sort which will appear in this book. He has to determine what constitutes the verbal event, and what form he will transcribe it in. Unless the analyst produces a fine-grained phonetic transcription (which very few people would be able to read fluently) details of accent and pronunciation are lost. In general, analysts represent speech using normal orthographic conventions. The analyst may hear an utterance which might be transcribed phonemically as / greɪpbrɪtn /. Is he to render this orthographically as *grape britain*? Hardly. He will interpret what he hears and normalise to the

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conventional orthographic form *Great Britain* inserting conventional word boundaries in the orthographic version which do not, of course, exist in the acoustic signal. If he hears a form / gənə /, is he to render this in the orthography as *gonna* (which for some readers may have a peculiarly American association) or *gointuh* or *going to*? The problem is a very real one, because most speakers constantly simplify words phonetically in the stream of speech (see Brown, 1977: ch. 4). If the analyst normalises to the conventional written form, the words take on a formality and specificity which necessarily misrepresent the spoken form.

Problems with representing the segmental record of the words spoken pale into insignificance compared with the problems of representing the suprasegmental record (details of intonation and rhythm). We have no standard conventions for representing the paralinguistic features of the utterance which are summarised as 'voice quality', yet the effect of an utterance being said kindly and sympathetically is clearly very different from the effect if it is said brutally and harshly. Similarly it is usually possible to determine from a speaker's voice his or her sex, approximate age and educational status, as well as some aspects of state of health and personality (see Abercrombie, 1968; Laver, 1980). It is not customary to find any detail relating to these indexical features of the speaker in transcriptions by discourse analysts. In general, too, rhythmic and temporal features of speech are ignored in transcriptions; the rhythmic structure which appears to bind some groups of words more closely together than others, and the speeding up and slowing down of the overall pace of speech relative to the speaker's normal pace in a given speech situation, are such complex variables that we have very little idea how they are exploited in speech and to what effect (but, cf. Butterworth, 1980). It seems reasonable to suggest, though, that these variables, together with pause and intonation, perform the functions in speech that punctuation, capitalisation, italicisation, paragraphing etc. perform in written language. If they constitute part of the textual record in written language, they should be included as part of the textual record in spoken language. If it is relevant to indicate Queen Victoria's underlining, then it is surely also relevant to indicate, for example, a speaker's use of high pitch and loudness to indicate emphasis.

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