Dialogic Discourse Analysis of Revision in Response Groups

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Introduction

Major theories of text meaning have traditionally located its source in either the text itself (formalist theories), in the author’s intention (expressive theories and cognitive theories of writing), or in the reader’s cognition (reader response theories and cognitive theories of reading). By contrast, dialogic accounts of discourse, including principally the perspectives of Bakhtin (1981, 1986) and Rommetveit (1974, 1992), locate the source of text meaning in the unfolding dialogue, or interaction, between conversants, including writers and their readers. In this formulation, meaning is not “in” the text itself, nor is the text simply a representation of the writer’s meaning. Rather, the text functions as the vehicle or medium which mediates an exchange of meaning. That is, the text is necessary for but insufficient to the realization of its meaning, which is dynamically configured by the interaction of the conversants. In this view, meaning itself is both phenomenal and situated, coming about only within a particular exchange between a writer and a reader in a particular context of use. This is not to say that the text means whatever the reader wants it to mean—after all, the reader is constrained by what the writer has written. Rather, the text’s meaning is “consummated” every time it is read, and each reading inherently reflects the particular contours and shadings of the writer’s utterance and the reader’s interpretation as these interact.
This chapter presents an empirical method for analyzing discourse conceived dialogically as a phenomenal event unfolding in time. Dialogic discourse analysis offers the powerful capability of examining both oral and written language within a common framework, and investigating their relationships and effects on each other. We begin with a review of dialogic premises. Then we move to the analysis of response group interaction as it affects the writing development of a college freshman at a large midwestern public university (see Nystrand, 1986a). We conclude by examining implications of this approach for the analysis of discourse and research on revision.

**Overview: Textual Space and the Phenomenon of Meaning**

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Figure 1 here

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We are all familiar with the famous visual ambiguity in the gestalt image of figures or vase (figure 1a). Here we see either the two facing figures or a vase, but we can’t see both at once: Foregrounding one images renders the other as background. As I argue elsewhere (Nystrand, 1982), the clever International Harvester logo (figure 1b) carries this kind of perceptual ambiguity a step further by juxtaposing an alphabetic sign (the letters “IH”) with a visual configuration (the frontal image of a tractor). In this unusual logographic-visual ambiguity, whether we see a text or an image depends on whether we read the logo as letters or view it as an image.
Semiotic ambiguity of this sort handily illustrates several basic features of the phenomenon of meaning. First, meaning involves a dynamic, cognitive event in which the interpreter “foregrounds” certain elements of the display while “backgrounding” the others. This interpretive act provides a quality of transparency to the object so that the interpreter sees “through” the object to its meaning and import. Second, the fact that reading the logo yields the letters IH whereas viewing the logo yields the image of a tractor shows that the meaning of the logo is in the cognitive act of interpretation, not “in” the logo itself.

Yet our example also illustrates how meaning transcends the cognition of the interpreter. The fact that the ambiguity here is either visual or logographic, but not, for example, musical or dramatic, demonstrates that the meaning we construct depends not just on how we look but also on what the artist has wrought. The International Harvester graphic artist has devised a clever object that elicits either the letters IH or the image of a tractor, but not other semiotic possibilities. Hence, the phenomenon of meaning depends fully on the successful interaction of two interpretive roles: the writer/artist’s with the reader/viewer’s. Meaning comes about only when the conversants synchronize their roles with each other. That is, for meaning to occur, the writer/artist relies on the reader/viewer to process her semiotic construct in particular, predictable ways. Reciprocally, the reader/viewer effectively works on certain assumptions about what the writer/artist was up to.
Reciprocity in discourse does not require that the writer and reader agree on the substance of discourse, but only that each conversant proceed on certain assumptions about the other’s semiotic efforts. The efforts of writers manifest in their choice of terms, text elaborations, organization, introduction, genre, topic, etc., reflect the writer’s particular estimates, or misestimates as the case may be, about what readers know and can handle, and reading requires the reader to make useful inferences about what the author is up to in the text. For skilled writers and readers, the efforts of each respectively, mutually, reciprocally entails those of the other, each conversant shaping the parameters of meaning and communication for the other. As Schutz (1967) explains, reciprocity is a transcendent social fact of any social organization: it is “assumed that the sector of the world taken for granted by me is also taken for granted by you, and even more, that it is taken for granted by ‘Us’” (p. 12). For more on the reciprocal character of writing, see Brandt [1990] and Nystrand [1986b, 1989]; for more on the reciprocal character of reading, see Tierney [1983; Tierney & LaZansky, 1980].

Description

The method of dialogic discourse analysis presented here focuses on the process of revision in response groups by relating a transcript of videotaped group interaction to the revisions students make to their drafts as a result of the talk. First, the revision is carefully compared to the draft to identify all changes. Then the changes are analyzed according to the
corollaries of reciprocity theory (explained below). The transcript illuminates the purpose and effect of the revisions. No coding of either texts or transcripts is required. This method examines the effects of talk about writing on processes of revision and has been used to track the development of response groups over time. Though it has been used principally at college level, there are no limitations in its use with younger writers. It can be used to investigate novice-expert differences in revision skills, as well as the unique interactions of writers and readers differentiated by level of skill and/or expertise.

Case Study: Analysis of Response Group Interaction Affecting Writing Development

The dynamics of peer response group discussions as they affect student revision present a unique opportunity to see reciprocity at work and to practice dialogic methods analysis. Peer response groups have become fairly commonly used in writing instruction. Students meet regularly over the course of a semester in groups of 4-5 for the purpose of presenting and discussing their papers with each other. When used properly, such groupwork provides continuous feedback to students, and after several weeks, it is not uncommon to hear students say they can anticipate what their group will say about their writing even as they are preparing drafts for class. In studies of 250 students in 13 classes of freshman composition at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, for example, Nystrand (1986a) found substantial benefits for students writing mainly for each other in small
groups as compared to students who wrote only for the teacher and spent no time in groups. College freshmen meeting regularly discussing their papers with peers wrote better and improved their writing ability more over the course of a semester than their counterparts who wrote only for the teacher. The peer-group students’ progress was due mainly to the development of superior revising skills. One reason for this was that the students simply did more revising: On average, they revised each paper about three times. More specifically, they learned where their papers were unclear or confusing and what their options were for revision. As they presented their papers orally to their groups, they even developed proofreading skills and typically marked up their papers even before starting group discussion.

In a follow up study, Nystrand & Brandt (1989) demonstrated the positive effects of group discussion on revision strategies. They compared the revisions of college freshmen working in peer-response groups to the revisions of students in more conventional classes writing mainly for their instructors. In all, they examined the 306 revisions of 91 students in 8 classes. Their research found, first, that by the end of the semester the response group revisions were of higher quality than the others. In addition, response group students (a) had more to say and were more specific than their counterparts about their revision needs; (b) explained more clearly the purpose of their revisions; (c) were more openly critical of their drafts; (e) more accurately estimated the strengths and weaknesses of
their papers as judged by independent readings; and (g) discussed their revision needs in a more coherent and integrated manner.

Just how does one go about tracking the effects of response-group talk on writing development? The method of dialogic discourse analysis sketched here proceeds by relating videotaped group interaction with the revisions students make to their drafts as a result of the talk. Materials required for analysis include: (a) copies of the drafts discussed, (b) videotapes of the discussion, (c) transcriptions of the videotaped group interaction, and (d) copies of the resulting revisions. The first step in dialogic analysis involves systematically and carefully identifying all changes to the draft as evidence in the revision. These changes constitute the data for analysis. Analysis itself proceeds by studying the transcript, and, if necessary, referring to the original videotape, to account for each change in terms of a corollary of reciprocity theory. Nystrand & Brandt (1989) found that virtually all changes can be traced to peer group discussions, that both the targets and scope of revision reliably affect the nature and extent of revision. When discussion was superficial, revision was typically perfunctory and superficial; when discussion was in depth, revision was typically substantive. Talk that focused on clarifying and elaborating specific points in a draft more was typically associated with revisions developing these points into coherent prose. In studies such as this, reciprocity theory is able to account for revisions comprehensively at the
levels of topic, comment, and genre. Hence, this technique offers a powerful window onto revision processes.

By this method, each text change is examined for its effect on reciprocity between the writer and her readers. We would expect effective response group discussion to focus on points in the text which threaten reciprocity (e.g., misleading introductions, failure to define terms new to readers, overelaboration of trivial points) and therefore create “troublesources” for readers. It is precisely such troublesources that define “choice points” for the writer. Effective discussions also articulate and evaluate writers’ options for revision. According to reciprocity theory (Nystrand, 1986b, 1989), the writer’s options at any choice point are either text elaboration (e.g., explanation or illustration of the problematic terms) or deletion (Chaopricha, 1997). Potentially, elaborations range from words and phrases to paragraphs, chapters, endnotes, and even, in principle, whole volumes glossing problematic points. Elaborations are themselves subject to the principle of reciprocity and hence must resolve troublesources, not create new ones. The start of a text serves the special function of establishing not only the discourse topic but also the genre. These principles and conventions, formalized as axiom and corollaries in Nystrand’s (1986b) social-interactive model of writing, are summarized in Table 1. These postulates govern skilled writing of any kind. Investigating their use in the context of response groups has the advantage of making
group discussion available as an empirical window onto the text processes of the writer.

Table 1 about here

Marissa’s View of the Sky Through Vincent’s Eyes. We now turn to a case study illustrating the axiom and corollaries of reciprocity theory in action and demonstrating the kind of analysis they make possible. In this example, we examine students in a freshman composition course at a large public midwestern university who discuss a draft for a paper about van Gogh’s painting and his emotional illness. In the following, Marissa reads a draft of her piece called “Starry Night” to her group while they follow along on photocopies.

A View of the Sky Through Vincent’s Eyes

Since I’ve been young, I’ve always enjoyed looking out my window at night. I love gazing at the dark sky and imagining what is out there. It amazes me to think that people on the other side of the country can see the same sky as I do, yet I know each person sees different things in it. Since I have taped a copy of Vincent van Gogh’s “The Starry Night” on my wall, I can lie on my bed during the day and wonder what van Gogh saw in the sky.

“The Starry Night” was dated June 1889. This date enables one to more fully understand what van Gogh was seeing in that sky. At this point in his life, he was in the midst of having “fits” as he called them. The doctors called them breakdowns, and knew that Vincent was on his way to being mad. In February of 1889, van Gogh had a break down, but he was quickly
released from the hospital. He was having hallucinations and started experiencing hostility from people. In the beginning of March, a petition was signed by more than 80 people saying that Vincent should not be free and on his own in the world. The saddest comment on the whole incident was that Vincent was aware of all the forces against him. In his diary he said that in some ways he was glad he was "shut up" because he might not control himself if he was insulted face to face.

As far as van Gogh’s art work, he felt the painter’s life was a bad job to have, at least in March of 1889. However, on April 17, 1889, he began painting again and finished 200 paintings in just a couple months. These months were known as his most productive and important in his career. On May 9, he was admitted to the asylum at Saint Remy, at his own request. At this asylum, he observed many mad people. In his diary he expressed his fear of being left in closed quarters as these mad people were. He overheard people discussing how patients, during their attacks, heard strange sounds and voices, and saw visions. Vincent experienced these things too, so once again, in his diary, he wrote of fear.

In Vincent’s “The Starry Night,” there is no doubt that he expressed fear and uncertainty. Overall, the painting shows mystery. To Van Gogh, his whole life, especially the future, was a mystery. He never knew what was going to happen to him next. Experts have written that van Gogh’s painting exhibits the imprisoning of stars and heavenly bodies. In the silent night, Vincent knew the sky held a monstrous life.

Marissa’s readers say they are unable to tell whether she intends to focus her paper mainly on van Gogh’s painting or on his emotional turmoil. She seems to assume that the character of the painting reflects the latter, but the group misses this connection. Hence, the draft is ambiguous and violates
the Misconstraint Corollary at the levels of both comment and genre. At
the level of comment, we can’t detect the direction of the argument. On
the one hand, if Marissa were to focus mainly on van Gogh’s emotional
history, her paper could be developed as a biography. On the other hand, if
she were to focus mainly on the painting, her paper could be developed as a
critical essay. Hence, Pete, one of her group members, asks:

Pete¹: Is this like a a biography? It’s really like a biography.

Marissa: [ This one is like

Joe: [Well you start out . . . uh You start out like getting into “The

Starry Night,” and then you went on to more or less kinda

just get into what [what he like]

Marissa: [Well what I wanted.]

¹ All names are pseudonyms. Transcription conventions, modified from those
originated by Gail Jefferson (1984), are as follows:

( ) pause of less than two tenths of a second
( .4 ) length of a pause in tenths of a second
(word) transcribed word about which the transcriber is unsure
( ? ) or ( xxx ) word about which the transcriber is unsure
((comment)) transcriber’s comment
((description)) visual description
= latched speech
[ onset of overlapped speech
; . . . . elongation of the sound immediately preceding the colon; multiple colons
indicate ? longer elongations
? rising intonation
. rapidly and fully falling intonation
, medium falling intonation
- sound immediately prior is cut short
>you know< speech between the greater-than and less-than signs takes less time
and therefore is faster than surrounding talk
<you know> indicates the speech between the less-than and greater-than signs takes
more time and therefore is slower than surrounding talk—typically
used when speakers are reading aloud as they write
°Oh° lower volume than surrounding talk
Ye~ah brief rise in pitch
Together underlined syllables are more stressed than surrounding talk, with higher
pitch and volume
Pete: His hallucinations and his craziness

Marissa: Right, craziness, but what I wanted to do is like sort of give the background of why he was the way he was and like because he had to go through all this stuff that made him really scared and in the painting can see why he’s scared but I just didn’t want to say [he was scared= Pete: [so:: that influenced him about starry night.
Joe: Yeah.

Pete: Just want to make sure that

Marissa: =about life. Cause see like all this stuff, like going into the hospital and stuff and the way people treated him that made him have those certain emotions.

Because this ambiguity involves the purpose and thesis of the paper, moreover, the draft also violates the Situation Corollary, which requires the beginning of a text to situate the reader in terms of a mutual frame of reference.

Joe: So maybe. O K In the second paragraph there when you come off with “The Starry Night” dated blah blah blah uh:: fit in there that uh:: “The Starry Night” was a (star) symbolized his kind of like uh::: freaking out, you know whereas you don’t go in there let it right into saying that.

Marissa: So when do I do that?

Marissa’s classmates astutely recommend the character of the needed
elaboration:

Joe: In the second paragraph, when you come up with the “Starry Night,” you didn’t, you didn’t go on to say that, you just say well the doctors called them breakdowns. Why don’t you kind of just throw in a few sentences that would explain uh that “The Starry Night” is kind of uh an example of his just kind of insaneness. You know?

Marissa: Oh, say right there, just like have a statement and then I don’t have to explain it in detail, and then I can explain it more in detail here?

Pete: Sure,[what is

Joe: [well, I mean you go all into it, but I mean just . it’ll be kind of like a thesis kind of for the second paragraph

The resulting revision shows considerable improvement over the draft, and provides an excellent example of how effective such groupwork can be. The revision clearly elaborates an explicit link between van Gogh’s painting and his personal life, arguing that adequate understanding of the art requires understanding his emotional life. Marissa deftly links them in two strategic moves, first at the start of the paper and then at the end. At the start, she adds “[van Gogh] had many experiences that influenced his thoughts and feelings, thus his artwork. It is more possible to understand the painting by understanding these feelings which brought the picture about” to the end of the first paragraph, providing a succinct thesis statement for the paper. She then adds a full second paragraph focusing on the turbulent
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Since I've been young, I've always enjoyed looking out my window at night. I love gazing at the dark sky and imagining what is out there. It amazes me to think that people on the other side of the country can see the same sky as I do, yet I know each person sees different things in it. Since I have taped a copy of Vincent van Gogh's "The Starry Night" on my wall, I can lie on my bed during the day and wonder what van Gogh saw in the sky. He had many experiences that influenced his thoughts and feelings, thus his artwork. It is more possible to understand the painting by understanding these feelings which brought the picture about.

In the painting, the sky is the most prominent feature. It takes up over half the canvas. Van Gogh's attention was definitely focused in the sky. He uses many shades of blue, from navy to baby blue. The moon is bright yellow with circles of pale yellow surrounding it. The stars are painted in the same shades as the sun, except not as bright. In the foreground, there are a few houses, a church with a steeple, and some hills. The tallest hill is dark blue and black, and shaped more like the shadow of a monster than a mountain. Right through the center are two large turning sweeps that look like gusts of fierce wind.

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In Vincent's "The Starry Night," there is no doubt that he expressed fear and uncertainty. Overall, the painting shows mystery. To van Gogh, his whole life, especially the future, was a mystery. He never knew what was going to happen to him next. Experts have written that van Gogh's painting exhibits the imprisoning of stars and heavenly bodies. In the silent night, Vincent knew the sky held a monstrous life. In the painting, the two violent gusts through the middle of the scene suggest an angry outburst of emotion that could only be expressed through his art. The light in "The Starry Night" gives nature its reality.

Throughout his life, van Gogh struggled to find the reality and reason for his being. He went from place to place, job to job, and person to person, trying to find meaning in his life. He needed something to give him definition. To him, this is what the light did to nature. However, the darkness of the sky seems to give the effect of taking over the light, or the reality. This is what van Gogh feared, the doom, or darkness, taking over in his life. Vincent didn't make his sky story, but the heavy, choppy brush strokes, that Vincent created, show agitation and lack of inner peace. Vincent tried, but could never find peace with himself.
Vincent suffered through many things in his life. In knowing of these events, often tragic, it is easy to understand why he painted the things the way he did. His paintings have depth. They display his strong emotions. It is important to remember that he was not just a mad and crazy painter, but a caring and sensitive artist who creatively expressed his emotions on canvas. Everyone in his day was too worried about making sure he was locked up, to ever appreciate his talents. “But I could have told you, Vincent, this world was never meant for one as beautiful as you.”

Marissa was regarded by her tablemates as more knowledgeable than they about both writing and art, and we can see how, perhaps ironically, this difference between them served her well. She came to explain herself fully precisely because she was unable to assume very much subtlety.

Conclusion

Dialogic discourse analysis effectively reveals several insights into the nature of writing. For example, though writing is most obviously an affair between the writer and her text, the full process of written communication extends beyond the text to implicate the reader as well. From the writer’s perspective, the text is very much the result and end product of the generative processes of composition. Dialogic analysis helps us understand, however, that writing is also a social and communicative process of negotiating meaning between the writer and her readers. From this perspective, the text is not the end but only the beginning: The text bridges the writer and her readers every time it is read, and it comes to life only when it is used for some particular purpose in a particular context of use. Consequently, in learning to write, the writer must develop a keen sense of
her text not just as a representation of one’s purposes as a writer but also a text “in play”; she must learn that her every “textual move” is premised, rightly or wrongly, on what she expects reciprocally from her readers.

Rhetorical approaches to writing instruction often assume that writers must know everything about their readers. In most cases, of course, this is unrealistic if not impossible, certainly for most writing that people do. Fortunately for the writer, this advice is also fallacious: Most things about the reader are not in fact germane to the purpose of a given act of communication. Writing well requires not that the writer know everything about her readers, but only that they take care not to exclude their readers. Hence, skilled writers must be alert to points that need elaboration, terms that could be confusing, passages that are too complicated. They understand, however, that these problems are not absolute but always relative to who’s reading when and in what context. Hence, their personal grocery lists may be highly abbreviated and cryptic in ways that chapters such as the ones in this volume may not be.

The importance of this point explains the potential of response groups for writing instruction: Regular, intensive, and effective response gives students an opportunity to try out their drafts and find out how they work. Of course, peer response is likely to be somewhat different from the technical help that teachers can offer. When well prepared for their efforts, peers can help each other, as Marissa’s classmates helped her, identify textual ambiguities and other problems, and their collective efforts to brainstorm
and find solutions instructively helps even the readers articulate writing problems and weigh options for solving them. After several weeks of work in response groups, students often can anticipate what their group will say about their drafts even as they are composing them.

Perhaps the most important implication of dialogic analysis is the extent to which it clarifies that the most elusive qualities of good writing, including clarity, style, development, and persuasiveness are phenomenological in nature, realized in particular contexts with particular readers and depending substantially on what the readers know and expect. When texts fail in clarity, style, etc., this means that the writer has misgauged her readers. The power of dialogic analysis is not only pinpointing precisely those points in the text where this happens, but also in understanding the resources that writers have for revising their work.

Dialogic discourse analysis has a great number of potential uses. It has been used to study:

? problems of technical writing, distinguishing, for example, between the challenge of addressing experts vs. novice users of computers (Nystrand, 1986c);

? textual explicitness not in terms of features of autonomous texts (Olson, 1977) but rather balance between what needs to be said and what may be assumed, i.e., as a problem of intricate writer-reader interaction (Nystrand, Himley, & Doyle, 1986; Nystrand & Wiemelt, 1991);
orthographic development in preschool writers, documenting the dialogic process whereby children learn to put spaces between words in English (Nystrand, 1986d).

genre (Himley, 1986; Nystrand, 1986b), distinguishing the ways in which writers negotiate interpretive orientations with their readers.

Research topics awaiting dialogic analysis include:

writing in different academic disciplines, e.g., investigating the challenges of humanities students learning to write in science and social sciences, and science students learning to write in the humanities;

writing in electronic media, e.g., comparing email and conventional genres of written communication;

investigating the nature of historic audiences by analyzing the character and absence of elaborations in historical texts.

Dialogic discourse analysis will always be a useful research tool to link features and functions of text with the reciprocal processes of reading and writing in particular contexts.
Works Cited


**Table 1. A Social-Interactive Model of Writing: Axiom and Corollaries** (Nystrand, 1986b)

**FUNDAMENTAL AXIOM:** A given text is functional to the extent that it balances the reciprocal needs of the writer for expression and of the reader for comprehension. Communicative homeostasis is the normal condition of grammatical texts.

**CHOICE POINT COROLLARY:** Potential trouble sources which threaten reciprocity define choice points for the writer.

**OPTIONS COROLLARY:** Text options at each choice point are text elaborations.

**MISCONSTRAINT COROLLARY:** Inadequate elaboration results in misconstraint, i.e. a mismatch between the writer’s expression and the reader’s comprehension. Inadequate elaboration at the level of topic results in abstruse text. Inadequate elaboration at the level of comment results in ambiguous text. Inadequate elaboration at the level of genre results in misreading.

**SITUATION COROLLARY:** The beginning of a text functions to situate the reader in terms of a mutual frame of reference.

**ELABORATION CONSTRUCTION COROLLARY:** Writers may elaborate texts at the level of genre, topic, and comment. Text elaborations in English include words, phrases, clauses, sentences, and paragraphs. Elaborations must be consistent with expectations initiated by the writer. Constructions which might fundamentally threaten reciprocity (i.e., complicate rather than clarify) may not be used.

**ELABORATION EPISODE COROLLARY:** Elaborations which approach the reader’s capacity for information processing mark elaboration episodes, which define new choice points for the writer and result in text segmentations (such as new paragraphs, sections, chapters, volumes, etc.).

**ELABORATION TYPE COROLLARY:** Three basic elaboration types are available to writers: (a) Genre elaborations clarify the character of the communication and the text type; (b) Topical elaborations clarify discourse topics; (c) Local elaborations, or commentary, clarify discourse comments.
Figure 1. Visual and semiotic ambiguity: (a) figures or vase: gestalt image. (b) tractor or “IH”: International Harvester logo